I'll make a man out of you yet

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I'll make a man out of you yet

by EarthsickWithoutYou

Summary

A Hannigram Omegaverse Bridgerton AU ❤️

Viscount Hannibal Lecter has a plan for finding a spouse, now that he considers himself retired as a notoriously philandering Rake. He only needs to find a calm, attractive and intelligent Beta wife and fulfill his obligation, as heir to a grand fortune and estate, of providing *further* heirs. He is *not* seeking the vulnerable intimacy and passion he might find with an Omegan spouse, and he is *certainly* not looking for a feisty, stubborn Omega with a temper as hot as his own.

The problem is, then he met Will Graham...

Notes

Thanks to Alexa for prompting me to finally write Omegaverse, and to Mel and Sage for sharing their knowledge of A/B/O with me!

See the end of the work for more notes

bad habits

Miss Tattletale's Society Scandals
June 1, 1814

My dear readers,

As the glorious Season commences, (by which I mean the Season: marriage season and its accompanying events, not the Summer!) do let us spare a thought for those less fortunate.

Those social events I've just referred to include an absolute gluttony of fetes and jaunts, from lavish dinners to extraordinary balls, and enough cricket and canoeing that everyone will have ample opportunity to flirt. If that is, the object of their desire has chosen to place themselves in the line of flirtation. The number of events to which young marriageable people of the Ton will soon be flocking is decadently and deliriously excessive. So, why would I pity anyone joining in such a lusciously promising saga?

Those less fortunate creatures who deserve not our charity (unlike those begging for their supper in the streets, these unfortunates lack for nothing except the ability to control the most slippery of possessions - their own offspring), but our pity are, of course, the Mamas of those most marriageable, desired, longed-for, impossible, elusive, handsome alpha Scoundrels.

While these Mamas all deserve our support and encouragement in such hard times, none of them have earned it so thoroughly as my dear Lady Simonetta Lecter.

Of course, Lady Lecter is the lovely and elegant social queen of the Season, always pleased and kind in guiding the new flock of young people to their ideal matches. She hosts many of the best balls and dinners, and always has an ear to listen, lips to wisely advise, and a shoulder to cry on.

Lady Lecter should know her share of love and marriage, given that the late and much lamented Viscount Lecter, her husband, was the love of her life. Their love story is legendary even among the cynical ranks of the Ton. And she successfully landed her youngest child, her daughter Mischa, an exquisite match in the form of Sir Zachary Gracefield. As such, Lady Gracefield now holds the position of the second most powerful, influential lady in London after her mother.

"Whatever can the matter be, then, Miss Tattletale?" My inquisitive niblets, I remind you that Lady Lecter has two children, and her elder issue is none other than Viscount Hannibal Lecter. The Viscount recently celebrated his forty-second birthday and has never married, despite the good looks, astonishing wealth, and staggering Alpha charm which would appear to ensure a blissful union and many little Lecters soon bouncing about his enormous estate.

Whatever has Viscount Lecter been about during the 24 years he has been officially "out" in society? Mind you, that is 24 London Seasons. It appears that much to the sad dismay of his esteemed and beloved mother, the Viscount has displayed an ingenious talent for avoiding the Season altogether. Whenever he could not quite wriggle free of the manacles imposed by

Lady Lecter's pleading (and most likely a sense of guilt for disappointing her repeatedly), the Viscount has dutifully attended, yet survived The Season still a bachelor. Every. Single. Time.

Nobody is more desired. No one, certainly is better-looking, more obviously…thriving in matters of…the boudoir, shall we say, no one wittier or more energetic, charismatic, and every good thing that causes a man to be universally lusted after and adored. Yet his ring finger is as naked as his exploits.

Let us take a step back and simply define what an Alpha Rake is, particularly as we are about to be besieged by a legion of these philanderers. It will be difficult to make one's way down the streets of our best neighborhoods, and to enter a ball or dining room, without nearly tripping over one or more of them.

It is safe to assume that at this moment, in London, we are hosting the largest population of wickedly handsome, virile, dangerous Rakes in all of England. Many such trouble-makers travel to the capital each marriage Season in order to take advantage of the equivalent number of innocent young Omegas scurrying about in their ballroom finery, hopeful of a fine spouse.

These Alpha Rakes have only one purpose, and it appears to occupy them whenever they are not gambling, enjoying a horse race, or temporarily too inebriated to indulge in certain activities. The Alphas seek to "enjoy" the beautiful, vulnerable ingenues of the Season, virginal Omegas ripe for the plucking.

These often doomed and naive creatures have usually experienced only one (painfully solitary) heat and are due for a second any day. It is almost shockingly easy for a strong Alpha to trigger the heat and enjoy the debauched days and nights that follow. So in "enjoying" the company of those innocent and misguided Omegas whose Mamas have not been suspicious enough of the Rake who was always hanging about, the Rakes are perfectly happy to defile.

The act of premarital intimacy, and so often in a heat, strips a young Omega of their entire future, nearly in the blink of an eye. With a single hapless surrender, the Omega has lost their maidenhood, their honor, their reputation (tarnishing that of their family at the same time) and their chances of ever making a match in their own social class. Too many of these sad victims end as beggars or — Gods help them and have mercy on their souls – governesses or teachers.

Families of marriageable young Omegas of the Ton expect a proper match, obviously joining Alpha land and aristocratic status with Omegan fortune. Land and Money have been the gold standard reason for marriage from time immemorial, not only among the rich. Even our country farmers, who are mostly sensible Betas, know it is wise for the owner of a large dairy farm to wed the goat girl from the farm down the road whose father can offer a small dowry, plus a daughter who works hard and has some knowledge and experience.

This is because in our world, marriages are about securing the future for one's family line, or for one's child in a way that reflects well on the parents. It is about advantage long before love is a consideration.

In short, families of the Ton do not expect their highly valued and precious Omegan child to be stolen away from them in the night to be promptly seduced and destroyed before ending up on their doorstep begging for reentry which may not even be granted. By and large, the preferred target of an inexperienced Alpha Rake is the Omega, due to the irresistibly primal allure of their scent and, naturally, their luscious bodies which are designed to fulfill an alpha's every desire.

Here, I have been giving examples of the lesser sort of Rakes. These ne'er-do-wells operate on transparent yet efficient, evil machinations which are beneath a truly supreme Alpha Rake. Those upstart lotharios lack the pride and foresight to anticipate what may happen after they seduce and abandon one or more lovely, lush Omegas during the Season. There is simply far too high a risk of serious consequences, such as:

1. Unintentionally bonding (most likely ending their campaign of seduction with a rather humbling trip to the altar)

2. Conceiving a pup or pups. In which case – if they don't find themselves wed once the Omega's parents learn of their actions, they may be facing down a pistol at dawn. Many relatives of young Omegas so badly used will gladly propose a dual. Many are good shots.

Thus, the consequences of trifling cruelly with an Omegan ingenue of the Ton may even be deadly. Those not running for their lives may well meet the wrong end of a bullet. Those who do not fight or run will endure a fate much worse than death: marriage.

Perhaps the rascal Alpha may evade these awful forms of demise, but the chances are simply too unknowable to just fling oneself into.

No Rake who knows what he is about will conduct himself so.

And Viscount Hannibal Lecter never behaved so, not even when he was a much younger man. Risk death? Social ruination? Or – perish the horrific thought – marriage??

Nay.

That is why a true Alpha Rake who knows what he is and what the devil he is about (quite literally) knows to limit his seductions (multitudinous though they may otherwise be) to certain lonely and enticing Betas who can survive such an affair not only unscathed, but rather pleased and benefiting with a new glow of complexion and health.

These are the attractive widow/ers, actor/actresses and singers, often a few years older than their Alpha lover, adding another flourish of excitement and intrigue. And these also include the more elegant and talented "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Night" who populate the city's most exclusive brothels. The only requirements an Alpha Rake has, aside from the lack of problems in this sort of arrangement, are those of exquisite beauty, sufficiently gentile bearing and manners, a sharp wit and a desire to fall from grace.

Beyond that, the whole matter is easily secured by obtaining rooms on a desirable, but not overly desirable, street in or near the city and regularly providing extravagant gifts of jewels, silk gloves and stunning gowns or suits.

With a Beta, an Alpha is still at a slight risk of potentially falling victim to that most vile enemy to their existence, Love. But the likelihood of such terrible events occurring is far lessened. Alphas and Betas often fall into bed together, and it is nearly always more advantageous than truly passionate. Again, I say, not always, but nearly. I do not forget that Miss Mischa Lecter, a Beta, quickly became the object of her Alpha future husband's dearest hopes, dreams and passions.

Such occurrences are so rare, however, compared to the chances of love accidentally erupting between Alpha and Omega. With, let us say, an impressively gentile and attractive Beta Lady or Gentleman of the Night, there will most likely be no bonding. That sort of thing can be enacted if desired, but usually has to be carefully cultivated by an Alpha and Beta couple.

And unlike Omegas, who are designed by nature to crave love, romance and stability in the arms of a protective Alpha, a Beta may be perfectly happy to indulge in superficial, temporary pleasure.

Risk of conceiving a child is similarly reduced, and with such Beta lovers, given their professions, the very rare infants of these unions are usually to be found mewling in a basket upon a church doorstep, or else are sent off to be reared in the country by some childless relation who is delighted to take the little bastard in. It is, at any rate, no matter for the Alpha Rake to be concerned with.

There is no responsibility. No guilt or regret needed. Certainly no furious family members to contend with.

And thus it is that Viscount Hannibal Lecter has never been without at least one mistress, or sometimes two or three at the same time, since he came of age. Why should he change his ways now, simply because he is getting on in years to be playing a young Alpha's games?

If anything, the Viscount has only become more annoyingly handsome and irresistible with age, and he is so profoundly rich in these (and obviously other key Alpha traits) that many a young Omega has fainted simply in being introduced to him.

Why should he marry one of those trembling little creatures?

The only true motivation would likely be continuing the Lecter name by providing an heir. In fact, a man of the Viscount's standing is generally expected to marry a fertile and hearty Omega so that he can be sure of at least three or four children. In amongst such progeny, there is usually at least one Alpha to inherit the fortune and estate upon their father's death.

The Viscount has indeed arrived in London for the season and is staying at the Lecter House estate with his dear mother. His sister Mischa and her husband are ensconced in their own enviable, grand lodgings in town proper. He has the support and the opportunity. All the pieces are in place to readily slot Viscount Lecter together with the wealthy and gentile Omegan beauty of his choice.

But the question is, did the Viscount really return to London to put himself on the marriage chopping block market at long last?

My faithful and hope-riddled readers, I must confess that I cannot quite bring myself to believe it.

I may be wrong, although it is almost impossible, so rarely as I ever am in error. And if the Viscount does marry this year, I shall readily eat my humble pie. Such an entertaining sequence of events, culminating in the marriage for our ages, will be well-worth the bland and uncomfortable dullness of having been wrong.

Yet I expect that much like the Viscount himself, my own diet of champagne, poached salmon, trifles and independence will remain thoroughly intact.

As a last reminder, I must point out that the Viscount is precisely that sort of Alpha who will still be strikingly handsome and quite vigorously able to breed and produce pups, even ten years from now. We can only hope for our dear Lady Lecter's sake, while she herself will likely still be an Omegan gem of beauty and charm, that she does not have to wait that long to see her eldest child wed and enjoy the company of her grandchildren.

Yours in Watchful Curiosity,

Miss Tattletale

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Chapter One: bad habits

"Really," scoffed the Viscount Hannibal Lecter, straightening his posture on a chair in the sitting room of his lavish estate. "It's worse than insulting, it's an embarrassment to the author. She *should* be ashamed, at least."

He scowled, rolled up the newsletter he'd just been perusing with great interest, and declared, "The only thing this deplorable Miss Tattletale's writings are good for is a weapon for killing insects."

His mother, Lady Simonetta Lecter, looked up from her embroidery with studied amusement. Her spectacles sat neatly on her equally neat little elegant nose, and her rose-pink dress was most becoming. Her tawny hair of golden-brown and auburn strands was gathered into a pretty twist at the back of her head.

Her presence always set Hannibal at ease, but he did not appreciate his own mother finding amusement in his annoyance at Miss Tattletale's account of his scandalous career.

"Indeed, Hannibal?" Lady Lecter paused, at first pressing her lips together to avoid laughing, and then pausing her stitching, lest she stab her own finger in distraction.

She had seldom seen her son looking so stiff and indignant, and he was a serious man most of the time. At the moment, he appeared to have become rigid as a marble statue, calcified by anger at the unidentifiable Tattletale.

Lady Lecter looked around the room with feigned concern. "Are there insects inside our home? I should inform Mr. Price at once, if so." She referred to the majordomo of Lecter

House. “I’m afraid one rolled-up copy of Miss Tattletale will hardly be enough to eradicate an infestation.”

“Humph.” Hannibal gave her a pointed look before tossing the newsletter into the nearby fireplace. “This abominable gossip rag is infested, certainly! Infested by constant, nonsensical presumptions about me. Can’t the wretched woman think of any other person to write about? It shows a lack of creativity which should indeed shame any *real* writer.”

“I’m terribly sorry, my dear,” his mother winced, her eyes twinkling. “But that’s not likely to change unless you can make yourself less interesting.”

He stood restlessly and straightened his waistcoat, then buttoned his royal blue twill tailcoat, a perfect match for the vest. It all came together effortlessly, yet impressively, with a crisp white linen shirt, a flawless cravat and a blue ribbon tying back Hannibal’s long, soft hair of blond, light brown and silver.

But this was typical. He always wore the very best, most exquisite attire, the most elegant and fashionable clothing to be had anywhere in England. It had been years since he’d experienced any doubt of his physical or sartorial appeal. As they could not be reasonably questioned, the focus of any public critique from these despicable, anonymous gossip columnists was always, it seemed, directed at the fact of his being an incorrigible Rake.

The Rake, as it happened. “The Rake to end all Rakes.” Sadly, there was a time, not so long ago, that such statements were true. He had seized every pleasure which had come into his path during his years of luxurious debauchery. It had been one of his maxims to live life to the fullest, but recently he feared that he had eventually narrowed the vivid appeal of pleasure by focusing it all in one area: selfish and hollow, brief gratifications.

As the color drained from his formerly exhilarating adventures, he became aware that he now sought more…wholesome pleasures. This recalled him to his family duties, and to his responsibilities as an Alpha Viscount, master of the estate, the man of the house. He was thus expected to continue the dignified family name by bringing more Lecters into the world.

His scandalous reputation used to hold a certain, well, rakish, appeal, and was once a source of smug pride. But now that Hannibal’s priorities were shifting, he found that he did not care to hear or read one more word of Miss Tattletale’s vile and inaccurate projections of his future, intermingled with laughing judgements of his past exploits.

“Ten years from now?” He muttered in annoyance, stopping by the large window and glaring out at his own expansive grounds, currently being deluged by a summer rainstorm. “She projects that I’ll wait ten more years to take a spouse. How absurd.”

“Are you…are you, dear brother,” said his younger sister Mischa from her red, velvet-soft chair opposite Lady Lecter’s.

Mischa had abandoned her own project of reading the latest installment of a serialized novel, at least for the time being.

Setting the magazine aside, she regarded her brother's haughty, rigid back as he kept looking out the window. Mischa exchanged highly diverted glances with her Mama.

"Are you suggesting that you mean to take a spouse this year?" Mischa managed to finish in her pretty, bell-like voice.

Hannibal found it damn near impossible to be angry with his dear sister. She truly was the sweetest soul in existence, as was Mother. He was lucky when it came to family, even if the reality inherent with being a Lecter man came with certain upsetting problems.

The resemblance between his mother and Mischa was a lovely thing to see, in one way. Yet on the other hand, it reminded Hannibal that he would never look into the living, loving amber eyes of his father and see the resemblance between them. It was striking, but his father had not lived to see it. Nor did Hannibal expect to see his own son grow to adulthood, looking like him, a reflection of their family love and how much his family was home to his heart.

"I am saying exactly that, Mischa. I have come to London determined to be married by the end of the Season." Hannibal remained stock still in front of the window, holding hands behind his back in an elegantly repressed manner. "I mean to commence this project at once. It's time I take a spouse and carry on the family line."

He made absolutely no reference to the joys of an intimate, tenderly romantic relationship with such a spouse.

"How wonderful!" Lady Lecter fought off the temptation to jump up and embrace her son, knowing that it would only irritate him when he was in this sensitive, gloomy sort of mood. "Why do you seem so…I do not quite know… *business-like* and dour about it? Are you not excited to attend this Season's events and find that very, very special Omega who will be the love of your life?"

"I know *I* am," Mischa grinned, swaying in her seat. She folded her hands on her lap, resting atop her charming, lavender dress with its small rose and lace details at the collar and sleeves.

"I won't be looking for an Omegan spouse, Mother," Hannibal replied sternly.

He sat nearer to his sister and mother, and for something to do, he reached for the tea and food on the small table. A late morning tea had seemed suitable for a relaxing day. But while his mother and sister might, Hannibal could certainly not relax. His stomach felt tight and uninterested in eating a morsel, although he'd not had much for breakfast. As an Alpha, it was bizarre for him not to enjoy hearty meals, and he looked forward to achieving his marriage, so that he could go back to feeling…normal. Then, he could finally shake off this embarrassing anxiety.

"Not seek an Omega for your spouse? But Brother, whyever not?" Mischa asked. "Everyone knows that an Omega is far more likely to provide pups. You said that is your main reason for seeking matrimony. Although I find it hard to believe that you don't secretly harbor a desire for romance."

“Oh, is it hard to believe, sister dear?” Fondly exasperated, Hannibal gave her a grim smile as he buttered his toast with enough force that he seemed to be almost attacking it. Even the lace doilies, polished, tiny spoons and gold-rimmed tea cups on the table seemed to be against him. “Believe it. I need no emotional entanglements and in fact, I will have none. Don’t be such a hypocrite, Mischa. You are a Beta, married to an Alpha. And you’ve had two perfectly healthy pups.”

“That is true,” Mischa smiled more warmly, patting Hannibal’s hand. “And I’m certain you’ve applied quite enough butter and *stabs* to the toast now. But by seeking a Beta bride – which I assume is your plan – you do lower the chances of conceiving.”

“It is entirely possible that I should be able to breed and produce pups with a young, healthy and energetic spouse. The matter is quite settled.”

Hannibal put the battered wedge of toast down on a pink china plate without even taking a bite. There was so much to be done, and so little time…why had he allowed time to catch up with him this way? It was clear to him that he ought to have stopped his philandering and sought a spouse at least five years ago. He was living on borrowed time, and now it had become a matter of urgency to begin reproducing before it was too late to do anything at all.

His frankly confident, self-important and snobbish certainty of getting whatever he wanted all the time was quite typical in Hannibal, and did not offend or surprise his closest family members.

With an affectionate smile, his sister said, “You might still fall in love with a Beta spouse, you know.”

“I do. Obviously, I see how you and Zachary feel for one another. It is a risk, no denying it. However, at least – even in the highly unlikely event I should fall prey to loving my spouse – there will be no physical force within us both, pushing us together and making us feel all of those overwrought, silly passions that occur between Alpha and Omega.” He glanced at his mother, realizing that he had gone too far. “No offense intended, Mother.”

Lady Lecter laughed, stirring sugar in to her tea. “You do often speak your mind without knowing it. A rare talent, though not one to cultivate, my dear.”

Hannibal sighed and rolled his eyes. “Humph,” he said again.

“You are right in stating that an Alpha and Beta have more choice in whether they will bond, the extent and nature of their intimacy,” his mother mused. “But why cut yourself off from the prospect of falling in love with your own spouse? Hannibal, you have such a big heart. Why let it languish in self-imposed solitude?”

He huffed another sigh, offended by her sentimentality which seemed to vanquish all sensible thought. “I understand that you can’t help thinking of the joy you and Father had together. And even that you want that happiness for me as well. But, Mother, you might be wise to consider – as I have – other aspects of Father’s life which I cannot avoid repeating, and how that will impact on my marriage.” Hannibal met his mother’s gaze of bewilderment and Mischa’s equally baffled, questioning brown eyes with a steely nod.

“If you will both excuse me. I shall see you this evening for dinner.”

He walked out of the room with that same stiff composure which made his inner stress and discomfort obvious to his mother and sister.

“Whatever do you think he means, Mama?” Mischa asked. “Usually, Hannibal is so easy to understand. He’s not exactly hesitant in expressing his opinions on most matters!”

They both laughed and Mischa added, tucking a blonde curl behind one ear, “Why should he talk in riddles now? And to us, the ones closest in the world to him?”

“He seems to feel some strange urge to protect himself from any affection which can be avoided, any…vulnerability in life.” Lady Lecter frowned, her embroidery forgotten as her forehead creased in concern. “My dear boy. Oh, Mischa, ever since your father passed on, Hannibal has been possessed with this…premonition of his own life’s fragility. No wonder he’s in a hurry to settle down and have pups. Less wonder indeed he’s determined to avoid the emotional risk of being with an Omega.”

“It does seem like a premonition of doom with him,” Mischa affirmed. “He never talks about the future as if it contains more for him than another decade or so. And yet, he is in splendid health. He’s in the prime of his life! I can’t understand why he should rule out certain genders in his pursuit of a spouse. For all he knows, he might find the love of a lifetime with an Omega, or he could marry a Beta and love them whether he wants to or not. Of course, he won’t want an Alpha spouse because he wants pups…but otherwise, he might be much more liberal minded!”

“My darling Mischa,” his mother chortled with a wry smile. “*Your brother?* Liberal-minded?”

“He is not so entrenched in outworn customs and assumptions as all that,” Mischa argued mildly. “However, I will agree that he is certainly a traditionalist. I don’t think anything in the world is more important to him than this family. And that’s why he’s become so obsessed about continuing our line.”

Lady Lecter stood and crossed the room to gaze out the same window her son had recently looked out of. And she saw the same hard rainfall pelting the ground, soaking the grass, making mud of the neat sands and dirt on their impeccable grounds. While Hannibal saw this storm as an example of destruction and ugliness, his mother only saw life and renewal. The Season was all about new beginnings.

Yet, she had a strangely persistent premonition of her own, telling her that her son was going to find his own new life in the last place he would go looking for it.

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Hannibal had been aware, since his father died of a drowning accident at the age of forty-five, that he would die young as well. There was no question of it in his mind. To go into denial would only damage his hopes of securing the family’s prosperous future once he was gone, and that, he would never risk.

So, he suffered with the knowledge, increasing with each year that passed, that he was living on borrowed time in this world. At first, old age (not actual old age, but middle age, since he'd never live to see fifty, much less sixty or beyond) seemed too far away to worry about. But one morning a few weeks ago, Hannibal woke up in his favorite brothel with a feeling like lead in his belly. All of a sudden, the fact of his age caught up with him. What the devil was he doing, lying about naked in a prostitute's bed, sleeping past nine and going out to do little more than find new mischief of all kinds?

Hannibal knew he was playing a young man's game and it was starting to look foolish, even to him. Miss Tattletale had that part right and it irritated him to no end, admitting this, even to himself. Curse that wretched, gossiping harpy!

He paced around his office, luxurious and businesslike with its shades of maroon, deep brown and gleaming gold decor. Like each room in the enormous house, it was a marvel of Baroque design. There were wall-sized paintings on nearly every place they would fit, the gorgeous art depicting many of the Lecter relatives from the past, in addition to lush landscapes painted by many great masters, commissioned especially to be displayed in Lecter House.

In the office, there was a respectable, calm painting of his father on the wall across from the desk. Hannibal met the late Viscount Lecter's eyes with a sigh of sadness, as usual. Those wonderful, loving eyes were coffee brown, exactly like his own. How he missed his father. The best father, the perfect Alpha patriarch, a shining example of all that was fine, right, decent and admirable in a man.

He knew now, as he'd known since he was sixteen, that he could never be some of those things his father had been. There just wasn't time. He had cut too many corners trying to squeeze all the happiness out of life that he could. Some of that time, he now felt, had been wasted with frivolities.

And he was very nearly ashamed of his past conduct as a heartless seducer who cared more about winning at card games with shallow friends than what his father would have thought of this man he'd become.

The fine, sturdy mahogany desk had been the elder Viscount Lecter's, and Hannibal treasured it, as he did all of his father's belongings. He had tried to keep them exactly as his father did, kept all of the decorative accents in the same places, the look of the office not changing in the least over the years since the elder Viscount's death.

Seeking to calm down, he sat behind the desk and took out the estate's account books. He might have lived a couple of decades as a reprehensible libertine, but he had maintained his family responsibilities to the letter. It was only in his personal morality and laxness in marrying that he had betrayed his father's expectations of him.

Since he took over his father's duties at the young age of sixteen, Hannibal had attentively, meticulously ensured that the family's prosperity endured. He was in charge of the estate management, including, of course their own house and grounds, its occasional improvements and frequent maintenance. And he worked closely with the large staff of servants to ensure that all daily necessities were carried out to the highest standard.

The tenant farmers would have sworn on mountains of holy books that the Viscount Hannibal Lecter was the best master they could have hoped for. He made sure their prospects were always overflowing with bounty, their families happy and supplied with their basic needs, the community which was his domain run in a firm but sensible and caring manner.

Hannibal was doing everything he possibly could in order to care for his family and their concerns while he still could. And he tried to avoid hurting them or anyone else by taking on affections or projects and ambitions which he'd never possibly complete.

How could he let himself fall in love, only to abandon that love in a few years' time when he died? How could he be vulnerable when…there was no time? No room for mistakes. His greatest, heaviest responsibility lay before him. His reason for being was to produce an heir. He must be sure to have a sufficient number of pups to fulfill this, and that required steady, strategic thinking, not a blind infatuation for the first pretty Omegan face he saw.

His mother and Mischa were blind, whether by choice or unintentionally, innocently. But they were ignoring the bold-faced truth even as it stared Hannibal down like the grim reaper incarnate. His father and two of his paternal uncles had all died before the age of fifty. This was reason enough to suspect his own lease on life had a limit that was fast-approaching.

Ever since he'd become a man, Hannibal had lived as if he would die by the time he reached age forty-five. He wasn't overly religious, but he did think the Gods had a design for his life, like everything else on Earth. They seemed to be telling him in no uncertain terms what to expect.

He would die, just like his father and uncles, in middle age. It was an inescapable destiny.

His uncles Robertus and Andrius had met the same fate, after all. Wasn't that clear enough? It was apparently some sort of…inherited curse. He supposed he'd never know until he saw his dearly departed family members in the afterlife and got some sort of explanation at last.

It wasn't as if illness ran in the family. They were a hardy, healthy, vigorous lot, the Lecters, particularly the Alpha males. Hannibal did not feel as if he was approaching death's door so soon. But it wasn't illness, really, that had caused the deaths of his father and uncles. They had been the picture of excellent health right up until they breathed their last.

His father had hit his head and drowned while bathing in a river, right here on the Lecters' own grounds. Robertus had died when his coach overturned, having unknowingly hired a drunk driver to convey him home, late one night out in the country. And Andrius had met his early demise merely by trying to protect a friend of his who had been challenged to a duel. In the wrong place at the worst possible time, noble Andrius had moved to help his friend and caught the bullet in his heart.

These were chilling and unchangeable facts. Hannibal might hold some – rather logical and factually supported – religious beliefs, but he did not consider his knowledge that he would die young to be superstitious.

So then. Being that he was going to die in a few years, he must find a Beta spouse who would be a wonderful parent to his children, who would be loved by Mischa and their mother, and

who could survive Hannibal's impending death without succumbing to inconsolable grief.

His mother was an Omega. Hannibal remembered, all too well, how Simonetta had been so devastated by grief, after his father's passing, that she had barely left her room for several years that followed. She had eventually recovered, but never loved again, still acting as if her bonded Alpha husband was… somehow always with her. As if nothing much had changed. And her devotion never could.

Hannibal hoped such thinking was a comfort to his mother, but he could never leave a sweet, adoring Omega to cope with that sort of misery and torment. How, indeed, could they be a good parent if they could not get out of bed in the morning? If he could avoid such crises, obviously he must do so to the very best of his abilities.

He believed in his own abilities and knew damn well how to take what he wanted in this all-too-fleeting life. There was no reason to think he could not walk into tomorrow night's ball, which marked the official opening of the Season, and find a perfect Beta to mother his pups.

He was *Viscount Hannibal Lecter*, for Gods' sake! He knew what he looked like, knew his charms and talents were irresistible. A Beta might not be as naturally passionate as an Omega, but common sense and the desire to secure the best possible spouse would make Hannibal's proposal a delight and an honor.

Melancholy, nearly all the time these days, restless when he knew it was pointless to be so, and resigned, Hannibal went on. On this night, in anticipation of the ball, he decided to make himself a list of marriageable Betas participating in this Season's festivities, and thus placing themselves on the market, as it were.

From what he'd gathered by questioning all of his friends and family (which cast a wide net; he was a popular and active man who knew anyone worth knowing), Hannibal was able to compile fifteen names which he thought seemed promising, each for slightly different reasons. He need not worry about them having land or money to bring to the union. The Lecters were far too wealthy and powerful in both assets for them to concern Hannibal.

This was all about finding a Beta of good family, someone who had been raised in proper, gentile ways and knew her place when standing beside a strong Alpha. A woman who wanted pups and was willing to go through the extra…'work' which might be required to achieve conception.

It was something Mischa and her husband had certainly never minded. Simple, natural facts of physicality and gender told Hannibal that he and his future spouse would probably have to engage in intimate relations every night for quite some time until a child was conceived. After the first child, it seemed to be easier for a Beta female to conceive again.

Keeping this in mind, as he sat at his desk, staring at the list of meaningless names, Hannibal concluded that he ought to make sure his future bride was pretty and had a decent personality, or he'd never have the patience to bed her. At least, not enough times to make conception likely. Other than that, he really didn't care what else she was, so long as she was not special or extraordinary enough to put him in danger of romantic love.

Since he decided that he must have some kind of standard as to looks and their ability to carry on a conversation now and then, Hannibal was forced to put parentheses around five names of less attractive Betas and some who had annoying personalities. He did not cross them out, but decided to rank them as last resorts, just in case he did not find a spouse among the prettier, more pleasant ladies.

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“Margot, you know very well that you shall have your choice of eligible and much-desired, wealthy bachelors, the moment you set foot in the ballroom tomorrow evening.” Will Graham smiled over the top of the newsletter he was reading, meeting his adoptive sister’s ice-blue eyes.

She fiddled with her painting materials, biting her lip. “I hope so. This ball is a somewhat daunting prospect. Making new acquaintances requires a great deal of manners, grace and delicate etiquette under normal circumstances. Now, I’ll be getting to know dozens of elegant, intimidating socialites of the Ton, and you know they all come with families, too.”

Margot pulled a face. She put her pallet, dabbed in earthtone colored paints, down beside her easel, sighing as her gaze drifted to her artwork. “I’m so nervous I cannot even paint, Will. What if my attempt to find a spouse should turn out to be a dreadful ordeal, or worse, fruitless? What if, after all our efforts, I fail?”

“I cannot believe it to be possible,” Will said with an encouraging, short laugh.

The warm, musical sound reassured Margot, who relied on her sensitive and caring Omegan brother as she had once looked to her parents for love and support.

Although they were the same age, Will had a certain nurturing (and, truth be told, sacrificial) quality about him. He’d been adopted by the Vergers, Margot’s parents, after his own parents died of consumption when he was only ten. Everard and Felicity Verger had been dear friends of the Grahams, and it had always been understood, if one set of parents should die, their surviving friends would take their child in as if it were their very own.

During Will’s inconsolable grief, Margot had been his constant companion, and her parents had treated him as a son, making sure he never doubted he had a loving home, a fine education, and all the encouragement – even though he was an Omega – to find the destiny he wanted in this world.

When Mr. and Mrs. Verger tragically lost their lives in a shipwreck, Will had become even more protective of Margot. He nearly forgot his own immense grief in comforting hers.

And Will wasn’t going to turn his back on them now. Mr. and Mrs. Verger, whom he called his Aunt and Uncle, would want him to take good care of their daughter. It was love that bound him to almost all of the Vergers. To his Aunt and Uncle and his dear Sister Margot, he would be forever devoted and faithful.

He most certainly had no intention of marrying, primarily as it was an absurd old tradition in which he was expected to become a soft, idiotic ninny who bore pups and ran a household

whilst his domineering Alpha spouse got to have a life outside of the home and do just as he pleased.

This made it easier for Will to devote himself to Margot's present mission of marrying well, and soon. An ultimatum had been issued to her by the estranged, rather cold-hearted Grandfather Redmont, who was now in charge of Margot's fortune until she was married. He decreed that Margot must find a respectable, rich husband or else she'd not see a cent of her dowry.

Her parents had unfortunately gotten themselves deep in debt with the old codger, and he would not forgive his daughter, even in death. His first offense had been Felicity's choice of husband, for Everand Verger was poor, though gentile. The second conflict was caused by his outrage at not being properly repaid for the loans used to purchase the family's home in the countryside of East Sussex, not to mention Margot and Will's education.

Will's presence in the family had always been a matter of contention as well. "That Omegan brat is nothing but a burden," Grandfather Redmont said the one time he bothered to visit Will and Margot, while they were deep in mourning for her parents. "Margot, you ought to turn him out of doors, show more sense than your ill-fated Mama and Papa. You are a Beta, be sensible, that is what Betas are for, is it not?"

Will had to bite his tongue so hard it bled to avoid talking back, and Margot faced the same distressing challenge. This horrible old Alpha had complete control of her future safety and security. The money he held onto with that iron Alpha grip of his was rightfully Margot's inheritance. She only wanted what was hers, and she had to smother the urge to tell her Grandfather where to go each time he made an offensive statement. Which was often.

These days, thankfully, the insults – frequently leveled at Margot's deceased parents, her profligate, repulsive brother Mason, and of course, Will, arrived via mail rather than in person.

She had to prove her intention to uphold the family's dignity, as if her surname were not Verger, as if her father had brought her mother and herself down into the dirt of poverty and failure. Now, it was up to her to reclaim the Redmont blood which still ran through her veins, and use her "Beta Common Sense" to prove it fast, before Grandfather decided she was not committed enough to the cause.

All Margot really wanted was a simple life of comfort, painting, living with her dear brother Will and frollicking the beautiful country hills as she did when a carefree girl. But, as Grandfather reminded her, she had another advantage aside from her Redmond blood and naturally "rational" thinking. "You're a damned fine looking girl. Could have any husband you set your cap to. That is why I expect you to marry the richest, most impressive gentleman you can find."

It was true that Margot was ravishing, with a rare sort of beauty that might be called ethereal. Her light blue eyes were striking, particularly with her fair complexion, adorably round cheeks, pretty figure and her mounds of long, curling, dark brown hair.

Although the dowry which Grandfather held over her head was a drop in the proverbial bucket to any man who was truly “rich and impressive,” Margot had enough “sense” to know that she was beautiful, even unusually so.

Many a man would be content to choose such a gorgeous, sweet-natured and sharp-witted lady, who nonetheless always behaved with graceful dignity.

She was never feisty or sassy, as Will so often was. Or, at least, she never dropped her perfect manners and gave her real, razor-tongued opinion of someone in their presence. When she was alone with her brother, Margot was remarkably candid, and often very funny indeed.

Many men would take such a wife gladly, bewitched by her virtues and most of all by her looks. Some of them were rich enough to disregard her own lack thereto.

Margot knew she had every chance of succeeding, if she wanted to marry the sort of Alpha her Grandfather surely envisioned for her. However, she was not so sure she wanted a male husband.

“Grandfather,” she had ventured during his ill-fated visit to their cozy, rustic family home. “Why do you keep referring to my future spouse as a male? Perhaps I shall take a female spouse.”

The bent, sour-faced man leaned forward in his chair, pressing down hard on his cane. “You shan’t, if you expect to receive a dowry. Female spouse, indeed! Why throw away the opportunity to have a real family? Female Alphas are not common enough to make discovery of a wealthy, available one more than a sliver of a chance.”

Margot nodded, having anticipated this as a possible rebuke. “By that, I suppose you mean a family is only complete with pups. But there are so many young ones at the orphanages, abandoned and in need. In such a case, I should be delighted to adopt.”

“Of course. Bring some heathen, disease-riddled abomination into the family, by all means! So long as you do not wish to inherit.”

And all of this had led Margot to the conclusion that she had little choice but to acquire a wealthy, impressive gentleman during the Season. Perhaps one who shared her liberal outlook regarding fidelity? She would prefer an open arrangement, wherein they would be partners in life while each allowed to conduct affairs as they pleased.

She stared at her painting of the house back home in Sussex, adding more wildflowers as she hummed and Will sat nearby, ignoring Miss Tattletale’s newsletter in his hand, since it was of very little interest to him personally. He really had not found it a compelling piece of reading and did not intend to peruse it again at any point. At all.

Their London lodgings were small, as living space in the capital was exorbitant, even for a snug set of rooms like this. But this was more than sufficient for Will and Margot, who were used to mellow, simple living. Will rather liked the dark yellow and maroon fleur de lis wallpaper and the chairs by the fireplace with their matching upholstery. They were old-

fashioned, but that soothed him somehow. Will would feel completely out of place in any truly grand home.

And that is one more reason why Margot is the marriageable sibling and I the forgettable wallflower.

It was regrettable that Will would soon have to endure a second heat without a mate, but such was life. He was not going to rush into matrimony simply to avoid being alone, as so many Omegas seemed to do. Better to be alone than with the wrong person. Yet it was a lonely, painful prospect, one he was glad to have been spared thus far. He knew it would be coming sometime soon, as he had been lucky enough to make it a year past eighteen without falling prey to nature's unfair and tormenting urges.

The craving for intimacy with a strong Alpha who could knot and breed him was beyond Will's control. He must go through this, and no one else would see how ridiculous he became, sweaty, dripping slick, needy for an Alpha's knot to the point where he'd have no choice but to pack some food and lock himself in the room where he had made his nest.

Shaking off the dreaded thought, Will considered Margot's fear of failure.

"I believe you need only be your sparkling, lovely self, my dear sister," he said warmly, "And the marital prospects will be lined up, begging for your dainty hand."

"That would certainly be convenient," Margot laughed brightly, brushing paint off her cheek with a handkerchief. "Your hand is far daintier than mine, though."

It was true in the respect that Margot had long, deft and artistic fingers, with small calluses where she often held her paintbrushes. More often than not, there was at least a little paint on her hands. Will had petite, soft hands. But he still considered himself downright plain compared with his sister.

Even in her gray floral dress, which was several years old and faded, only worn at home, Margot looked heavenly. Will could only imagine how beautiful she would appear in her new, hand-beaded, sparkling ballgown the following evening.

"We shall also have Lady Bedelia DuMaurier to guide and assist us at the Lecters' grand ball," Will reflected. "Another boost to aid in your successful entry onto the scene."

Margot sighed. "Without a parent or close female relative to chaperone me, and as you are so young, Will, I had no choice but to ask her Ladyship to accompany us and make all of the introductions. I don't know anyone else of the upper Ton, and I was only able to approach her with the offer due to her friendship and lingering affection for Mama."

Will admitted, "Although Lady Bedelia's rather frigid attitude and obvious penchant for scheming are not exactly my cup of tea, I am grateful indeed that her affection for my aunt lives on so strongly. That, if nothing else, recommends her as a true friend."

"You are right. Still, it's a bit awkward," Margot admitted, rising to stretch, poetry in motion. With her long, slender arms held up over her head as she rose on tiptoes, she continued, after

a yawn. “But we are good at making the best of a challenging situation, aren’t we?”

“We’re experts by now.” Will grinned. “You look exhausted.”

“Mmm. I’m for bed,” Margot said, patting her mouth as she yawned again. “Perhaps I shall dream of the one I am meant to love.”

Will noticed that Margot seemed to regard love and marriage as two separate things altogether. He thought that if some wild miracle ever caused him to marry, it could only ever be for the deepest love. Yet he perfectly understood how Margot had to split certain concepts in two, in order to be true to herself, but obedient to Grandfather at the same time. He longed for the future, when life could be simpler and much more pleasant for Margot, as it used to be.

“Whoever you dream of, I’m sure they will be wonderful,” Will smiled. “So long as they are not Viscount Hannibal Lecter.”

“Oh, the Viscount!” Margot enthused, “I thought him an excellent possibility for me, as it happens. He’s rich, powerful. I’d never have to worry again. And he is not the romantic sort, according to Miss Tattletale - so perhaps we could make an arrangement to suit us both.”

Will scoffed. “An excellent possibility? Margot, I don’t think I want you anywhere near that scoundrel. I know you have read Miss Tattletale’s account of the man. The Viscount is surely the devil incarnate, an unapologetic Rake who has left a trail of broken hearts behind him. How could you marry such a man? At least you should find an honorable person. There are some Alphas who can be described that way, few and far between as they are. You can do five thousand times better than him.”

Margot crossed her arms, warily amused. “‘Five thousand,’ indeed? How finicky you are, making such determinations sight unseen. The Viscount has surely got your attention, at least. Could it have anything to do with *this?*”

She crossed the room and took Miss Tattletale’s newest issue from her brother’s hand, then flipped it over to show a sketched illustration. An artist named Mr. Brian Zeller was responsible for the renderings of famed Ton socialites which appeared in each issue. However, when pressed, Zeller insisted he communicated with Tattletale via post only and had never actually met her. The matter of her identity, therefore, remained a mystery.

Admittedly, Will did find a more intriguing mystery in the eyes of the Viscount in this lifelike portrait sketched by Zeller. It showed an exceptionally handsome man, unmistakably a powerful Alpha who knew his own strength and prowess. Those high cheekbones and dark eyes, combined with long hair tied back from his noble face, did catch Will’s notice. Which meant nothing at all.

“If I find the Viscount interesting, in any respect,” Will insisted, regretting the slight squeak in his tone, “it is only because he’s so dreadful. It is fascinating to learn of his exploits, as one reads of murderers in the crime reports.”

“You’re comparing him with murderers?” Margot’s dark brows arched in surprise.

“Is that not what it is to seduce and abandon so many lovers?” Will questioned, shaking his head. “He’s murdered their hearts, left them broken. I am sure he’s bedded at least…fifteen lovers in his disreputable career as a Rake.” It never occurred to him that some of the lovers on Lecter's long list might have *wanted* to be defiled and then left behind.

Margot covered her mouth and giggled. “But Will…many Alphas have bedded that many Omegas or Betas. Or even more.”

Will knew so little of such matters that even the inexperienced, but more social Margot possessed a greater understanding regarding sex and what Alphas…did.

“Well. Then,” Will said, putting his hands on his hips, tossing his fluffy curls back from his smooth brow as he lifted his face defiantly. “He has surely bedded…*forty* lovers, at minimum!”

“Even if that were so,” Margot grinned, teasing him by plucking at his white shirt, tugging the fabric at his belly where he was ticklish, “Having…” She whispered dramatically “intercourse,” then changed back to a normal tone and continued, “Is hardly equivalent to bloody murder.”

“You may be right,” Will admitted regretfully. He much preferred to win every debate he engaged in, whether small or high-stakes. “But in any case, the Viscount has a tarnished history and could never be trusted as a partner in life. I wish you would avoid him.”

“We shall see,” Margot shrugged. “Tomorrow night, in fact!”

With a sprightly step, despite her exhausted state, Margot made her way towards the stairs leading to her room. “You might face a dreadful shock and actually enjoy yourself at the ball, you know.”

Will laughed at this absurd suggestion. There was nothing less likely. He despised large social gatherings and had a rock bottom regard for the rich, especially those overbearing, usually despicable Alphas of the Ton.

In addition to these facts, Will also happened to have an unfortunate tendency to place his foot into his mouth when meeting new people. He was painfully blunt and very awkward when surrounded by strangers.

Although he was confident that he could help Margot avoid the unworthy potential spouses and find the right one, Will did not expect to “enjoy” any aspect of the Season.

“You might dance!” Margot called over her shoulder, halfway up the stairs.

“I shall not,” Will retorted.

He made his way towards his own room on the first floor of their humble lodgings, just making out the sound of Margot cooing, “You might even fall in looooove!”

Will snorted another cynical laugh and said loudly, “Good night, Margot.”

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Will brought a candle into his dark little bedroom and set it on his dresser. He stepped back, watching himself in the mirror as he removed his daily attire, another slightly worn black suit such as he usually wore. The only variation was his one brown suit.

A proper suit for the ball had been acquired by Lady Bedelia, along with Margot's gown, and would be delivered tomorrow afternoon.

It was silly, not to be able to come to terms with the simple fact of one's own nature. Will could not be otherwise than he was. He was an Omega through and through, even if he despised the thought of becoming some… love-addled, servile spouse to a high-handed, controlling Alpha. Even if he resented how many Alphas and Betas described Omegas as soft, angelic, perfect little housekeepers, sensitive, sweet, but incapable of making their own choices in life.

Omegas supposedly made the best, most loving parents, and indeed being a father or mother took over their whole existence once the pups arrived. And an Omega was the most precious housewife or husband, knowing what would be just right in every duty as the spouse of an Alpha.

Omegas were reputedly weak and needed a strong Alpha to protect them, keep them from the harshness of the cruel world they could not bear to comprehend in its entirety. Omegas were made to be coddled and spoiled by Alphas, to be treasured like little porcelain trinkets on a high shelf. Will had heard this so many times that it no longer made him sick to his stomach. Instead, he felt numb.

He did not want to be anything because people said that's all he could do or be. But here he was, in the body of an Omega.

So he had weaknesses. There were all sorts of desires raging through his young, smooth, slender body which he could not prevent himself from having or even dreaming of. He stared at his chest, where it was rounded in small breasts with dark pink, sensitive nipples.

His porcelain skin and the rosy flush in his cheeks, the redness of his lips, especially as he'd been nervously biting at them, all of these were Omegan features. He had a flat belly and delicate waist, but child-bearing hips, undoubtedly so. His behind was also…plumper than most of his body, as if he'd been designed to possess certain softer features that appealed to Alphas.

Objectively, those features were not ugly in the least. Sometimes he actually liked how he looked and felt, even the ache between his thighs which included not only his male sex but a slit with warm folds that grew wet with his occasional arousal, and of course during his heat. He had touched himself and marveled at what his body could do, when his cock felt hard and his soft entrance grew so sweetly wet. Forced to pleasure himself excessively during his lonely heat, Will had learned so much about his own erotic nature that it somewhat embarrassed him to recall.

Will did not hate his appearance, only that it made people think so much less of him, judging him by a set of antiquated prejudices. If he had anything to do with it, the people of London were soon going to be educated on the topic of who Omegas really were, and he'd continue fighting for increased equality between the genders, too. It was the primary drive of his life, aside from helping Margot find her match.

He looked into his own eyes in the mirror, bright blue and wide, surrounded by long, dark lashes to match the curls atop his head. Questions he could not even define or put words to swirled in his mind, making a curious anxiety darken his gaze.

Finally, Will shrugged, having considered himself as Will Graham, who is going to a grand ball at Lecter House. He'd be mingling with the most extravagantly privileged Alphas of the land, along with Betas such as Lady Bedelia who possessed the highest societal rank within reach for their gender. Will did not doubt for a moment that he'd also see quite a few fellow Omegas who were running towards the altar, instead of regarding it as a place he would have to be dragged to, kicking and screaming. He wasn't sure how that made him feel.

In bed, wearing his long white nightshirt, Will hugged his pillow close, feeling a different ache that began in his heart and soon caused a sympathetic twinge in his stomach. Sometimes, when he let it, it did hurt to be built for certain functions – fertility, softness, a desire for love and protection – knowing that to give into them would only lower him further in the eyes of Alphas and Betas who were already too prejudiced towards his gender. He still had to feel the often excruciating ache for that love, for pups he would never give birth to nor raise, and a spouse who adored him and who could not possibly exist in reality.

But he could never bear to become merely a pretty possession, a jewel in the crown of an Alpha who did not love the real him, but only what Will could give. What they could take from him for their own satisfaction. For he had so very much to give that he felt it burning in his heart, fluttering in his stomach, tingling on his skin, aching at his core. If he ever began to give his love to an Alpha, he feared it would be impossible to stop letting more love keep pouring out in an everlasting waterfall that could drown him.

Will came to no conclusion about these matters except to stay the course, for he knew no solution for his conundrums. As if it were not enough for him to be an oddity amongst his sex, Will was poor as a churchmouse, besides. Even if he met an Alpha whom he could love, no one of the Ton would surely even think about marrying a dirt poor Omega who was Nobody's son.

His father had been a hard-working man, but not a gentleman. That was all that mattered to these wealthy elite: birth, money, what they could get from you. Will only wished he could honestly claim he had nothing to give.

He slept restlessly, falling in and out of wonderlands, glimmering ballroom finery, diamond chandeliers and ladies with feathered adornments and shining jewels in their hair, the candy-sweet sound of the string quartet playing popular songs as couples danced exuberantly. Will was among the dancers, but without a partner, following motions which in the dream world made sense.

When he woke in the morning, he did recall dancing so capably among the rich London Ton, but the entire dance was made up, jumbled and bizarre to his waking mind. He chuckled softly as he fluttered his lashes and grew more aware of the new day. Another piece of his dream floated back to Will, although it was difficult to see with conscious perception. Still, he recalled dancing his way down a line of couples all neatly paired and jubilant. He was alone until he came to the head of the line, where a handsome, perfect gentleman stood waiting for him like a groom at the altar.

It was an Alpha. It was Viscount Hannibal Lecter, in fact. Will's fancy had imagined him in flesh and blood, doing its best to transfer the black and white pencil sketch from the gossip newsletter into a person. The result was a bit blurry, but like the rest, it had made sense in his dream. The moment had been completely beautiful and blissful; he knew that he was to dance with the viscount, and that Hannibal Lecter was waiting for him with a skip in his eager heartbeat.

As dreams went, this one was certainly among the more ridiculous visions his sleeping mind had ever conjured. Yet, while he could laugh at the strange dancing from his dream, when it came to the image of the Viscount waiting for him with such excitement and admiration, Will couldn't laugh at all.

you know that I'm no good

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miss Tattletale's Society Scandals
June 3, 1814

My dear readers,
I come to you now with – what else? – several important announcements after Lady Lecter's ball yesterday evening. Now that the Season has officially begun, I believe it's destined to be quite the bumpy ride…and thus a highly entertaining one.

It will not surprise many of you to hear that I have named Miss Margot Verger the season's Glittering Gem. This is a title I only bestow once a year to the most fascinating, sought-after and beautiful young lady during the Season. She must possess a certain je ne sais pas which makes her a universal object of desire among the marriageable of the Ton. All of this, Miss Verger accomplishes as easily as she sets her lavender dancing shoes on the ballroom floor. "Yet she is a Beta!" Indeed she is, but Margot Verger is no ordinary Beta…

The Ton had already made note of the lovely and charming Miss. Verger (just shy enough without being obnoxious about it – like that mousy little nuisance Miss Frederica Lounds, just amusing enough without taking a joke too far. Able to hold her own in intellectual conversations without bragging). Soon after arriving in London with her adoptive brother, an Omega named Mr. Will Graham, of whom we shall have more to tell later, Miss Verger drew every eye with that mysterious, irrevocable thrall which only a true Glittering Gem possesses.

Almost as quickly, the gossiping Mamas and even several tittering Daughters of gossiping Mamas contrived the notion of a match between Miss Verger and the Viscount Hannibal Lecter. This was only to be expected, even before they met in person. As the two most eligible and gorgeous creatures of the Season, it is only natural to anticipate chemistry and wedding bells.

Furthermore, the Viscount's reputation as a Rake, and his apparent vow to abandon such seductive antics to enter into matrimony, adds an intriguing flourish to the entire affair. Can Miss Verger tame the infamous Viscount, who has turned his nose up at every other wealthy Beta girl in his path since they began accumulating in London?

We shall certainly be watching. Some of us will be a bit let down if the Viscount surrenders his evil ways that easily, and indeed I might miss writing about his scandalous mischief.

Others will feel a certain triumph, seeing the Viscount conquered and proved a mere mortal Alpha like any other. It will almost feel like a victory to us all, even if a disappointing one – but this too only stands to reason. For the Viscount is nothing if not rife with contradictions.

To everyone's surprise, these two people who were already soulmates according to the vast majority of everyone around them, did not actually dance until almost the end of the ball!

Miss Verger, escorted by her brother Mr. Graham and Lady Bedelia Du Maurier in an ice blue dress which anyone might kill to wear (possibly deaths were accrued, who knows?), was certainly pleased to meet the Viscount, anyone could see that, and her smiles were enchanting. Meanwhile, the Viscount's admiration was equally clear. Still, they went their separate ways until midnight chimed in a room full of baffled and worried Mamas and their equally concerned offspring.

I cannot account for this delay, but perhaps the suspense was intentional, either on the Viscount's side or Miss Verger's. By the way, Miss Verger's gown was a decadent creation of emerald green taffeta and lace, and she wore her soft, curling brunette hair in the prettiest, swirling upsweep I have ever seen, secured by an emerald, gold and pearl barrette.

It's more than apparent that she could never afford such finery without the patronage of Lady Du Maurier, but no one was thinking about that. Nary a member of the Ton seemed anxious about Miss Verger's small dowry – for she is a gentleman's daughter, and with so many dazzling traits to recommend her, she truly does cast a palpable spell.

Speaking of triumphs –! No one could look at Miss Verger in her green gown, golden ribbons in her hair, without their jaw dropping in admiration, hatred, or both.

Although it certainly took them long enough, once the Viscount and Miss Verger made their dancing debut, they looked even better side by side than anyone had predicted (the predictions had been enthusiastic; this seemed ethereal). That was despite a rather garish wine stain on his Lordship's shirt which could not be entirely concealed beneath his waistcoat and jacket.

But even more interestingly bizarre: earlier, it appeared that the Viscount twice ran afoul of the rather dour, if handsome, young Omega, Will Graham – Miss Verger's protective and "difficult" brother.

We are all rooting for the Viscount's apparent pursuit of Miss Verger (he gave the young lady every indication of sincere intentions to court her, doting on the Glittering Gem with gentlemanly devotion worthy of a knight from the round table.)

Despite our collective well wishes, it was ill-advised for the Viscount to offend Mr. Graham once, much less twice. A little bird told me that Miss Verger intends to have every gentleman who vies for her hand vetted by Mr. Graham. In other words, if her brother finds a potential husband unimpressive or worse – Miss Verger will say "no" to the man's proposal.

There is a rumor going about, suggesting that Miss Verger's elderly relative, who controls her fortune, has ordered her to wed an Alpha and begin producing pups post-haste. This preference for an Alpha might be in the Viscount's favor, but by the look of things, Mr. Will Graham is certainly not.

Yours in highly amused expectations,
Miss Tattletale

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Chapter Two: you know that i'm no good

Just as Will had anticipated, Margot veritably floated into Lady Lecter's lush ballroom, looking like an angel in her green gown with its golden accents.

And he trailed behind, staying close enough to keep an eye on proceedings and play his requested role of judging potential husbands, but giving her space to dazzle. He was aware that with his youth undermined by his terminal seriousness and fervent, controversial views on Omegan rights, he was something of a shadow compared to Margot's sweetly glamorous light. The last thing Will wished to do was drag her down with his own unavoidable flaws and quirks on this, her big introduction to London's Ton and the Marriage Season.

Will wore a neat, nicely fitted suit, tailored to his proportions by the expensive and snobbish fellow whom Lady DuMaurier had hired for the occasion. Her Ladyship told Will he looked very well and might easily capture some hearts for his own future marriage prospects. When Will gloomily rejected any such idea, Bedelia sighed and said, "Well, then, at least try not to speak more than is absolutely necessary."

"Bottled up" was not generally how Will cared to keep his thoughts. His feelings were entirely different – those, he generally kept under lock and key. However, although the point was made in an almost-snide, chilly tone by her Ladyship, there was no denying the truth in her advice.

Will was not here to repel suitors and friends from his dear Margot; rather, he was there to protect her interests and security whilst vetting her beaux until they found a perfect spouse for his dear sister. It would be counterproductive to bother the Ton (who were extremely unlikely to favor Will's social cause, even the Omegas, mainly spoiled and quite happy with their lives) by imposing his political tangents.

The music, played by a string quartet in one corner of the large, extravagantly beautiful room, was delightful. All the favorite dance songs streamed along, one after another like a ribbon being pulled through the corset of the night, bonding them all together. For who did not love treading the boards to the familiar sounds of "Mrs. Chiver's Favorite Waltz," the ever-popular Scotch reels, and "Mr. Beveridge's Maggot"?

Will admired the resplendent decor, from the crystal, candle lit chandeliers to the pure white walls covered in lovely, meticulous golden flowers. He was not at all certain that the gold was not real. Margot seemed as if she belonged there immediately; even the detailing on her dress matched the design on the walls. The gleaming marble floor barely registered a sound as her low-heeled, glittering shoes made their way to the first few introductions she would make (and Will must endure).

He knew he probably did not look like a person who should be at such an assembly, regardless of his illustrious patron (who only helped him because he was Margot's brother and chaperone) or his sister's irrefutable charms. Will had never been made to fit in anywhere, he feared. He could not find a place of belonging no matter where he went, and even when he tried. And if anyone in the room knew his parents were at least five or so rungs below them on the social and economic scale, they would certainly be repulsed.

Fortunately, no one seemed to pay Margot's sullen Omega brother much attention. Will could enjoy his advantageous view of all suitors approaching his sister while unbothered by having to socialize. Possibly, Lady DuMaurier had given good advice, after all. Silence on Will's part was sometimes golden.

Margot was almost immediately swamped by besotted Alphas and even a few brave Betas; graciously, she curtsied as Lady Du Maurier introduced each one. The men varied as to looks, manners, charm and lack thereof, but each of them was very wealthy indeed.

"I've had many requests to dance, but there are only six places on my card for the first half of the evening," Margot whispered to Will as Lady Du Maurier, satisfied that she had done "her part" for the evening, set off in search of wine. "Shouldn't I save one or two spots for anyone else who may not have arrived just yet?"

Will smiled, inwardly thrilled that the Viscount was late, even though he lived there. Perfect! It was almost too easy to ensure that Margot and that terrible Rake-Scoundrel person would not be dancing together.

"You should accept the six partners who you find most intriguing," Will encouraged sagely. "Why waste time wondering about those who aren't present, after all?"

Margot bit her lip and studied her dance card of firm ivory paper, with a small neat pencil attached by a ribbon. Will had one of the cards in his pocket, but naturally, did not expect to use it. They were simply handed out to all of the young, single guests upon arrival.

It would not do to be rude and declare he was too high and mighty to condescend and dance. People always misread his serious and careful nature as conceited because of course they did.

"I suppose you are right," Margot murmured after a few moments' deliberation. She began penciling in the names of each partner, choosing, of course, from among the Alphas:

Captain Matthew Brown
Lord Francis Dohlerhyde
Doctor Frederick Chilton
Mr. Randall Tier
Mr. Anthony Dimmond
Mr. Tobias Budge

In all cases, Margot had chosen the partners who seemed to be the most well-mannered, or else, the most potentially entertaining. Captain Brown, formerly of the Queen's Militia, and more lately a self-made man of trade fortune, was a flirt with a sly grin which she found amusing. Lord Dohlerhyde and Mr. Budge seemed quite the opposite: severe and humorless, but there was no denying both were handsome, impressive and showed flawless etiquette. Mr. Dimmond had a certain mischievous sparkle in his eyes, suggesting he knew everyone's secrets and would love to divulge.

Will realized that Margot probably felt no genuine attraction to the men she would be dancing with. Of everyone present, she would probably prefer to dance with the lone female Alpha, Mrs. Beverly Lockwood (nee Katz). However, since Mrs. Lockwood was a married woman,

Margot could not expect an invitation to dance, and the endeavor would be fruitless anyway. She was not there for romance or even a delightful bit of flirtation; she had to pick a husband and soon, or end up a penniless waif.

All of the positive attention and friendly smiles were contagious, and Margot was enjoying herself a great deal before long, easily melting into the simple, lively chatter.

As she took to the dancefloor with Captain Brown, Will breathed a sigh of relief. Viscount Lecter had finally arrived, just in time to see the lady of the hour swept away by six other Alphas. Hannibal would only barely be able to fit in a brief introduction to Margot. By the time dinner was over, Will suspected his Lordship would be seducing some poor creature, having forgotten Margot's existence. One could only hope.

"I should like to make a long overdue introduction, my dear Will," said Lady Du Maurier, appearing by Will's side as he watched the dancing.

He could tell by her distracted, uninterested demeanor that whoever it was had asked to meet Will. She tended to forget his existence until annoyed or otherwise reminded of it. But he smiled politely, bowing as two ladies approached in exquisite gowns with matching golden-brown curls framing their elegant faces.

"Lady Simonetta Lecter and Mrs. Mischa Gracefield, allow me to present Mr. Will Graham." Lady Du Maurier vaguely waved a hand in Will's direction and drifted away again.

"Oh, Mr. Graham, what a privilege," said Lady Lecter, with a smile of such genuine warmth that it filled her kind eyes as well. "We have been eager to meet you since talking with your charming sister, Miss Verger. She speaks so highly of you."

"I…that is most kind of you," Will fumbled. "Um, it is lovely to make your acquaintance."

"Tell the truth, Mr. Graham, you're among friends now," Mischa Lecter prompted merrily. "For I have officially decided we are to be friends. Do you despise balls?"

"Despise? Oh, dear me, no," Will blushed, "That would be a terrible way to return your kind invitation."

"Please, child," Lady Lecter laughed gently, "Do not fret over such matters. We are not offended by anyone being uncomfortable in a large social gathering full of various pressures. Not everyone finds them thoroughly delightful."

"Well, your beautiful home and gracious company are thoroughly delightful." Will smiled more genuinely in relief. "And the music is wonderful. I appreciate it all."

"As for…the dancing?" Mischa raised her eyebrows teasingly. "And the possibility that you might make a fine marital match this Season?"

"Dreadful," Will chuckled, surprised to find that the apparently abominable, morally bankrupt Viscount should have such pleasant relations.

Could such a noble and sweet lady have really raised an absolute devil of a Rake? It was baffling to consider.

“We must turn you around, then. After all,” Lady Lecter cajoled, “You are a striking young man in your own right. But you haven’t taken out your dance card since you arrived.”

“I confess I am indeed...uncomfortable at the thought of presenting myself in public, particularly as an object of courtship, and as an Omega. It feels something akin to presenting myself on the meat market.”

“I understand,” Lady Lecter nodded. “Believe me, I have been there. It does get easier, if you meet the right people. I know that times have only become more difficult for Omegas since I was your age. But there are still good people of all genders. You needn’t shut yourself away so young.”

“It’s just that the majority of the two other genders are keen to discriminate against, belittle and objectify Omegas,” Will complained honestly. “Present company excluded, of course, Mrs Gracefield. This is a topic about which I feel passionately. Perhaps sometime I may offer you the informational pamphlets which I have composed? I hope to continue fighting for Omega rights until even the haughtiest Alphas are forced to acknowledge us as equals.”

While his companions listened very politely, Will gulped, realizing belatedly that he had gone on too long about his crusade.

“Forgive me, I…”

“Please, do not apologize, Mr. Graham,” Mischa reassured him. “I think what you are doing is incredibly noble and commendable. How ever do you manage it, while chaperoning your sister and helping her to make a match? It all seems so time-consuming and complicated!”

“I don’t know,” Will laughed.

“In that case, let us encourage you to enjoy yourself a bit more and not be fully deluged by taking care of everyone else…”

There was a certain “plotting” gleam in Lady Lecter’s eyes which Will found ever so slightly foreboding.

Mischa glanced at her mother and grinned. “I would like to introduce you to someone who would make an ideal dance partner for you, Mr. Graham. Would you allow me the pleasure?”

Will had no choice but to nod and force another smile. He had already blabbed on for ages about his pursuit of justice, not five minutes after meeting his estimable hostesses. So he owed it to them to allow this small favor to occur. Whoever they wanted to introduce him to could not be that bad, surely. After all, it wasn’t going to be…

“Brother!” Mischa said cheerfully, grasping the Viscount by his elbow and nearly shoving him in Will’s direction as only a sister can handle her brother. “I must introduce you to Miss Verger’s charming brother, Mr. Will Graham. I am sure you will get along famously.”

The Viscount looked at his sister as if he assumed she was up to something, giving Will the impression that she wasn't in the habit of making dance matches for him on a regular basis. But she was in the habit of pulling pranks on her egotistical and lofty sibling.

However, when she was finished speaking, Hannibal seemed relieved and actually pleased to make Will's acquaintance. His (deceptively) warm amber eyes landed on Will's face with eager interest, and he spoke pleasantly.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Graham. The more I hear about your sister, the more highly I esteem her, and now, having seen her in person, I find that the Ton has not been exaggerating her virtues. As her brother, I'm sure you are equally as fine an individual."

Will began to understand how this vile scoundrel had seduced all forty or so lovers in his sin-littered past. The smooth, engaging confidence and strong competence poured from his presence, along with a woodsy and spicy scent, perhaps with a hint of leather. His powerful physique and effortless charisma were daunting, if not utterly hypnotic. In person, he was so handsome that Will genuinely felt he was meeting someone much larger than life.

It was customary for men at balls to wear black suits with white shirts, but Hannibal diverged from this by wearing a pine green jacket. The effect was striking, adding a splash of undeniable style to the evening. Will's own new suit, which matched the other black and white ones, seemed plain by comparison.

Even though he detested most of them, Will had to admit the Viscount to be the epitome of a desirable Alpha.

But Will knew his Lordship was lying. His only true motive for being nice to Will was to use him, try to get more information about Margot, and most likely to charm Will into eventually approving him as a suitor. He was to be most brutally disappointed!

"Thank you, my Lord." Will disliked the automatic flush in his cheeks and the way his stomach seemed to flutter at the man's nearness. That foolish dream came back to his mind's eye and did not help.

"Is your card full, or would you be so good as to grace me with the next dance?" Viscount Lecter looked at him expectantly, and Will was irritated to find his own heart pounding.

The older man's eyes traveled curiously from Will's agitated face to his neck, only slightly exposed beneath the high reach of his collar. Will was hotly, nervously aware that the Viscount had scented him and became momentarily lost in the act of doing so. How absolutely obnoxious!

"I would be only too happy to dance with you, my Lord," Will said tensely. His smile not only did not reach his eyes, but he could feel it stretching his lips in a mask-like facade of good cheer.

This did not apparently deter the Viscount, who nodded and seemed satisfied. As Will reluctantly took out his little dance card and penciled in Lecter's name, he noticed Mischa and Lady Lecter encouraging the Viscount.

They were happy he was going to dance with Will, which was genuine and kind, even if Will could also tell they thought it would be amusing to challenge the older man by presenting him with a stubborn and self-righteous young Omega who spoke his mind so frankly.

“I should warn you,” Will began as he and Hannibal made their way to their places, standing across from one another in a line of dancers.

He lifted his hand as Hannibal mirrored the motion, along with everyone else. The musicians had tuned their instruments and would soon begin the next sprightly jig.

Please let it be a sprightly jig? Then we won’t have to talk too much.

“Warn me?” The Viscount looked at him in puzzlement, and Will realized instinctively it was a rare incident for him to feel genuinely confused.

“I’m not a very good dancer, and my social skills are possibly worse,” Will confessed.

“Whatever you do after a speech like that is sure to be impressive,” Hannibal smiled, “Is that why you begin acquaintances by insulting yourself?”

Will turned red and frowned. “No, indeed, my Lord, that was not my inten–”

The music began, and it was not a brisk jig but a mid tempo song, better than a waltz, but still slow enough to make refusing to talk to one’s partner silly.

As they followed the (thankfully) simple movements of the well-known dance, Will fought to ignore the dormant romantic in him when it tried to surge up in his traitorous heart.

He must not think that a moment like this seemed to be out of a dream, simply because of the stunning room and the smooth, expert moves of the dancers around them, the swishes of skirts and smiles exchanged between partners. Despite the music and the softness of the evening which felt magical – it was not a dream. It was not a fairy tale.

Dancing with this handsome, clever, morally depraved Viscount was more like a nightmare. He could only turn this terrible situation in his own and Margot’s favor by carefully dissuading the older man from pursuing her.

And above all else, I must remain calm.

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Hannibal could not understand this bizarre young Omega in the least. It was a supreme honor to be asked to dance by a Viscount, and the host of the evening’s festivities, too! What was the fellow about, acting so dull and fidgety? This was certainly not the attitude most people showed when meeting him, and for an Omega, the lack of palpable admiration was even stranger.

He was surprised, having heard rumors that the brother of his intended fiance Miss Verger was unpleasant, as he’d assumed it must mean Will was ugly or witless. But Will Graham was a fine-looking specimen, with deep blue-green eyes full of trembling secrets and soft,

pink cheeks that indicated his near-constant state of embarrassed self-consciousness. Even within that state, the boy's temper was obvious.

Hannibal had done nothing to offend, nothing at all – how could he have been more friendly and accommodating? Yet Will behaved as if this dance was taking place on the way to the gallows.

With such a lithe, firm body and plush lips, not to mention those silky brunette curls, Will might have more invitations to dance than he knew what to do with, but he never smiled. Eye contact was rarer, frustrating Hannibal.

Damn it all, now I want him to look at me. I want to know what he looks like when he smiles! Are these all…Omegan tricks intended to draw me in with a poisonous lure?

"I don't feel the need to impress you," Will clarified, flinching slightly whenever their hands briefly touched. "Why should I? Because you're an Alpha and richer than I am? Because you've made it well-known that you'd like to court my sister?"

Hannibal spoke drily as they stepped closer, meeting in the middle, and then back again. The Viscount felt a small twist of foolish deprivation at the loss of more immediately scenting the boy. The heat flowing from Will's person was obnoxiously potent for an Omega who was not actually in heat.

"Not necessarily," he said, "although those would be completely normal reactions. Rather, out of basic politeness and dignity, I assumed you would want to make a good impression, not only on your host and a man above your station, but as, perhaps, your future brother-in-law."

The "basic politeness and dignity" comment hurt; Hannibal nearly regretted it when the boy's vivid eyes grew suddenly wet. But Will took in the rest of Hannibal's words with a return to his scowling and indignant manner.

"How absurd," the boy insisted, "A man above my station? You think that wealth, power and your superior placement on the biological food chain ought to make me worship at your noble feet? And as for marrying my sister, I think it's time I warned you again, on quite a different topic. You can forget about Margot's hand in marriage. I shall never give you my approval."

The Viscount felt the Omega's anxious reactions as if they came from himself, a natural risk of their closeness and his Alpha body chemistry. And a great annoyance. With the quickest, most insubstantial press of their palms, or a clasping of their hands, Hannibal's heart beat faster. Will's scent was spine-tingling, unnecessarily delicate and pure in a way that made the Viscount's biologically primal side palpate with desire.

And this was precisely why he wanted to marry Margot, the lovely, calm, Beta sibling. Omegas were nothing but trouble for an Alpha like him who wanted to avoid lustful passion, not to mention facing down this pretty little imp's tantrums.

“You don’t even know me.” Hannibal led Will in a series of faster turns with their arms raised aloft and their fingers pressed together.

Their eyes seemed to be locked together, too, and soon after, he could barely hold back from staring at the boy’s half-exposed neck again.

“Your reputation precedes you,” Will retorted.

Oh, those full, petulant lips, that soft pink tongue, the perfect, gleaming white teeth. Hannibal could only imagine how sassy, feisty and otherwise impudent the boy must be, that he was not constantly hassled by ambitious crowds of suitors, even without a fortune. Beauty such as his was quite worthy of comparison to Margot’s own. But Hannibal was beginning to get the idea that Will’s attitude deterred attempts of courtship before the words could fully form on any Alpha’s tongue.

“I thought better of you, merely from your gentlemanly demeanor and having heard that you are a wonderful brother to Miss Verger. But you’ve had your opinion of me pre-formed by the likes of…Miss Tattletale?”

“Really, my Lord,” Will huffed, “If you had not been reading Miss Tattletale’s column yourself, you would not know where I might have heard about your checkered past. Furthermore, everyone reads her, and to pretend otherwise would be ridiculous.”

“She exaggerates. It’s a gossip column about people she doesn’t even know. The guttersnipe is probably some pathetic…seamstress or ladies’ maid, fantasizing about the glamorous, sinful lives of her betters…”

“Guttersnipe?” Will stepped on Hannibal’s toes, and the Viscount suspected it was not clumsiness that caused the misstep. “What must one do to earn that title? How poor and friendless must one be? I suppose once you accept that I’ll never help you marry Margot, I shall become a guttersnipe on the dustheap of the world as well?”

“For goodness’ sake, Mr. Graham, you are difficult to get to know, much less to have a regular conversation with at an assembly intended for pleasant diversion. Perhaps we should change the subject.”

“Fine,” Will sniped, “You can choose.”

“You aren’t wearing any scent suppressors, and you don’t entirely hide your neck,” Hannibal observed, unable to ignore his curiosity on the matter. “Yet you seem to despise everything related to courtship and the Season so fiercely…I can’t imagine you are trying to lure in an Alpha mate.”

Will smirked, and Hannibal felt a sharp rush of pleasure to his senses at the sight. Even a sarcastic smile was gorgeous on this boy’s extraordinary face. He hid the reaction as well as he could with further high-handed haughtiness.

“Does it bother you?” Will demanded to know, his voice growing a bit higher in pitch. Boyish aggravation only made him more damnably fetching. “That I dare to allow myself to

be seen and scented by Alphas without intending to let them bed or wed me?"

"Of course it does not bother me, nor any other Alpha with a modicum of self-control." Hannibal felt sweat breaking out on his brow as the fervor of his defense nearly yielded to a strange desire to give in.

Why should he admit to crimes of which he was innocent, while condemning his own gender as a whole? It was insane, surely, but Hannibal couldn't help wanting to please Will at almost any cost. However, given that it was insane, he defaulted to continuing the argument.

The trouble was that his retorts to the boy's quick-fire remarks were intended to stoke the flames. He liked Will's passionate commitment to beliefs that were contentious and unpopular. Even the Omega's inappropriate flares of temper were provoking and irresistible. This too was insane, but perhaps it was safer.

Unaware of Hannibal's inner struggle, Will plunged onward, following the steps and movements in the dance with vindictive aggression right on the verge of being too forcefully engaged for the act to be called celebratory rather than an actual battle.

"Ah, yes, certainly," Will said with an adorable scowl. "Yet, unbelievably enough, at least half of the Omegas in this ballroom are obscuring their scent – whether altogether or only a partial suppression. Despite your vigorous defense, my Lord, one could almost presume that Alphas cannot control themselves, and the marriageable young Omegas of the Ton have begun to realize it. It nearly looks like a matter of self-defense from those who would impose their lustful energies too early and only for their own pleasure."

"I can't understand how you keep talking so quickly and emphatically and continue to breathe properly," Hannibal said, rather breathless himself from attempting the same feat. "As you lunge through the dance without missing a beat, practically stabbing your hand against mine and shooting arrows at me with your eyes, only making a mistake when you step on my feet, that's the fourth time incidentally. If it is by mistake. I somehow doubt it, despite your insistence on being a poor dancer."

"Are you attempting to change the subject again, my Lord?"

"Perish the thought. This is so eminently diverting and delightful. Practically the reason why festive evenings of dance were invented!" Hannibal rolled his eyes. "If certain Omegas and their parents have been taken in by Miss Tattletale's account of the Season, then they all live in dreadful fear of attacks from so-called Alpha Rakes. Of course some will try to pass as Betas, revealing their gender only once they know it is safe with the Alpha of their choice… and others will remain openly Omegan, but lower the level of temptation embodied in their natural scent."

"*So-called* Alpha Rakes?" Will scoffed. "Oh, *now* I understand. I take your point very clearly, my Lord. You mean to tell me that Alphas face a great deal of discrimination and unfair assumptions!"

His sarcasm was even sharper than his startling blue glare.

Hannibal swallowed hard, wondering if the other dancers or those looking on had sensed the tension between them even as they continued to follow the correct beats and turns. It was an absurd and potentially embarrassing situation, and he could hardly wait for the overly long song to reach its conclusion. Of course.

“Just so,” he bit out self-righteously.

“And the discrimination you describe, the false assumptions and worries of Omegas, regarding greedy Alpha lust…these are entirely unfounded?”

“You seem bound and determined to defend your gender, Mr. Graham. Do I not have the right to do the same?”

The song ended, but the lively debate went on undeterred. They nearly slammed right into each other, not realizing the number was ending. Instead of rushing away in opposite directions, each man forced a fake, sardonic smile and kept arguing under their breaths, so it appeared they might have been finishing a pleasant conversation. Unless anyone looked closely.

“First of all!” Will glowered when he nearly collided with the older man’s broad chest.

He took a step back but remained close enough to speak so that only the Alpha could hear him. Hannibal assumed this was because Will was here to support his sister, and it would not be nice for him to be seen quarreling with their host. If only such proper decorum were genuine on the part of this attractive, yet unhinged Omega!

Whispering harshly, Will went on, steadying himself. “I am bound by the very fact of my gender and shall remain bound, trapped and otherwise miserable for it all the days of my life. I hope it comforts you to know that this is the lot so many of us face, as you pity your own. I issue you a friendly reminder, my Lord, that Alphas are privileged above the other two genders by vast disparity of wealth, property, social ranking and respect. You are eagerly respected by one and all wherever you go, while I have to prove myself worthy of an intelligent conversation each time someone takes one look at me and decides I must love discussing cut flowers and embroidery, or pine for the suffocating second trap which is matrimony. I cannot possibly have social or political opinions, much less correct, supportable ones!”

“By the Gods,” Hannibal sighed, “That was ‘first of all?’ You do go on. As we are obliged to leave the dancefloor and go to dinner, Mr. Graham, I suppose it is best that you defer ‘second of all’ for the time being. And I offer a deep apology for having inadvertently offended you.”

“Oh, please.” Will rolled his eyes and turned on his heel, striding off whilst doing his best to remain upright and not to appear quite so wobbly-legged as he actually felt.

In reality, it was for the best they had parted when they had. By the time Will finished his “first of all” speech, he’d been so lost in the Viscount’s dark amber gaze and the flecks of gold within it that he had entirely forgotten what ‘second of all’ was going to be about.

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Will went outside for fresh air as soon as he had done his duty by sitting with Margot through three delicious and strangely unpalatable courses. Everyone else seemed delighted by the flavorful fare, so Will was uncomfortably forced to realize his own appetite had flagged for other reasons.

His stormy encounter with the Viscount still had his heart racing, even an hour later. Whenever he glanced over to the host's table, where Hannibal sat chatting amiably with his family – just as if he did not have a care in the world! – he had the uncanny feeling that his Lordship had been watching Will just a second before.

Margot was happy with the evening, describing the opulent feast and wonderfully rich, velvety wine with her highest praise. Will was able to pay attention, mostly, to her account of her previous dance partners, gathering that none of them had seemed like suitable husbands.

Captain Brown was too sleazily conniving, even if it was ever so amusing to converse with him. Lord Dohlarhyde made her blood run cold, though she could not say why, and Mr. Budge seemed indeed to have no sense of humor whatsoever.

Mr. Tier was oddly obsessed with various wildlife and went on throughout their time together on only this subject, with a level of committed detail that Margot found unsettling.

Dr. Chilton was painfully self-absorbed and hardly seemed to need a spouse when he loved himself so devotedly.

And the dashing Alpha Mr. Dimmond spent their dance looking over Margot's shoulder at a pair of Omegan twins, one male, one female, who stared back and batted their eyelashes.

"I do believe my luck is about to turn around, though." Margot was visibly relieved as she made this observation. "For I am finally to dance with the Viscount. He is last on my dance card for the latter part of the evening. I followed your advice on accepting partners, but I did keep just one spot open in case his Lordship should ask. And he did. Will, I think I've done my bit to engage with other Alpha suitors, and given that each of them proved such a disappointment, you can't begrudge me giving our host a chance."

Will fit in a quick glare over at the Viscount, this time catching him dead-on in the act of staring at his former sparring – that is, dance partner. As he flushed immediately at the jolt he felt when their eyes met, he clutched his own hand tightly under the table. He peeled his harsh look away from his Lordship and looked at Margot in surrender.

"I suppose. But I was obliged out of politeness to dance with the Viscount earlier. And we did not get on very well. I would need some serious evidence to change my ill opinion of the man and recommend him to you. He does not have even a tiny sliver of my approval at present."

Margot laughed. "Yes, I saw the two of you dancing. You both looked like ostriches being threatened by a gun-wielding farmer. It seemed that you chased each other off accordingly. Did your debate end in a deadlock?"

“No. I obviously won the argument, seeing as his Lordship has the lowest, most sadly predictable view of my gender. And since he does not have the grace to admit when he is wrong, you can anticipate a difficult spouse, if not a full-on controlling despot.”

Margot raised her eyebrows, her tiny fork hovering above a slice of lemon cake with vanilla icing. “Is that so? I shall have to judge the matter for myself.”

“And I shall have to hope that among your five partners before the Viscount, you’ll find a more suitable candidate,” Will grumbled.

Out on the veranda, Will’s empty stomach did the grumbling as he paced around the pretty garden in the cool night air. He wished that the pleasant weather or the thriving floral confections which marked the extravagant display would help him to feel better. But he did not seem to be calming down entirely, the way he usually did after one of his arguments. Will was hot-headed, but reasonable, and fairly liberal with forgiveness. It was unlike him to still feel this angry about such an inconsequential dispute.

His bad luck continued when he saw the Viscount himself emerging from the same back door Will had just slipped through a few minutes earlier. Hannibal was accompanied by several other gentleman who seemed to be social intimates: Captain Brown and Mr. Dimmond among them.

The men stepped out onto the veranda, a cigar in each of their hands. And they went on talking cheerfully under the light of a full moon, which (hiding behind a nearby bush) Will suspected might be the cause of his ill luck on this awful evening.

“You tell me now that you’ve not found a wife among the fifteen names on that list of eligible Beta ladies which you made so confidently?” Captain Brown laughed. “Poor man, that is quite the let-down.”

“Not all fifteen, I’ll wager,” Mr. Dimmond put in archly. “He’s still to dance with Miss Verger. She is such a fine-looking and pleasant lady, I fully expect her to be named the Season’s gem by Miss Tattletale on the morrow. Who could possibly be a better choice for the future Viscountess Lecter?”

“I confess, I have my hopes pinned on Miss Verger,” Hannibal sighed, obviously pitying himself the ordeal of sifting through Beta women of the Ton as if they were cattle to be bought.

“All the other girls on the list were completely unsuitable,” Hannibal elaborated. And he went on (and on!), listing the “inferior” qualities of the unfortunate ladies on his agenda, as Will bristled with wrath in the itchy bush.

One lady was too talkative and empty-headed, another had outlandish child-rearing beliefs. Further “possible Viscountesses” were eliminated for being “too quiet” or “vulgar,” and perhaps most amusingly, “full of herself.”

That was downright rich, coming from the vainest man in England, Will fumed.

Finally, after laughing at the Viscount's sad struggles and wishing him great luck with Miss Verger, Hannibal's annoying companions started to drift back indoors for the second and last round of dancing.

Hannibal paused briefly to put out his cigar and dispose of it cleanly, a delay in his departure that Will had not anticipated. He moved too soon from his hiding place and the branches jostled audibly.

"Who's there?" Hannibal called, sounding suspicious.

Bloody hell. Will thought he could still escape unidentified, but he stepped on a small, fallen branch when he tried. It crunched.

"I know you are there. Show yourself at once," Hannibal ordered.

He was too fast for Will, catching up and grabbing his arm before the Omega could scramble away.

"Release me!" Will demanded in great vexation. He tried to jerk his arm away, but the Viscount's superior strength did not budge. "How dare you?"

"How dare you eavesdrop on private conversations?" Hannibal asked angrily. He let go of Will, as if he had forgotten he was still holding the boy's arm.

"I didn't mean to! You all arrived on the veranda and I didn't have time to leave without you seeing me. After our foul encounter earlier, you'll forgive my hesitation to repeat the experience."

"So you hid in the bushes?" Hannibal failed to repress a smile as his face relaxed.

To Will's aggravation, the Alpha, who smelled much too good at this proximity, plucked a few little leaves from his rumpled curls.

"I did. And while there, my Lord, it was my burden to overhear the despicable remarks you and your friends have been making. How can you speak of the ladies you court as if they were objects or dumb animals to be chosen at your whim and used for your own purposes? How can you refer to marriage as a prison, even as you pursue it so vigorously?"

"I don't *want* to be married; I *must* be married. Not that it is any of your business whatsoever. I will have you know, young man, I am not to be judged by certain off-hand remarks made after several brandies, among intimates with the belief that no strangers are listening. If you misunderstand me based on such shoddy evidence, that is your shortcoming, not mine."

"I must be the most unpleasant stranger you have met all night," Will replied in fierce frustration.

Hannibal paused and looked at him with curious, lingering interest. "I suppose you probably *should* be."

Will felt rage rising inside him again at the presumptuous manner in which the wealthy Alpha judged and assessed him. As a bizarre creature, Will supposed he must be an entertaining sort of diversion, if nothing more. The Viscount was probably amused to observe a peculiarity, an *aberration* such as Will Graham in close quarters. How absolutely infuriating! How abominably rude!

He planned to go back in and avoid this horrid man for the remainder of the evening, praying for a swift departure once the Viscount had finally imposed his presence on Margot.

“One more thing, my Lord, before I bid you a second and Gods willing final goodnight,” Will seethed. “Enjoy your dance with Margot, but don’t hope to marry her because I won’t allow it. Not ever.”

He went back inside, leaving Viscount Lecter staring after him in a state of quite indescribable perplexity.

After a few prolonged moments spent in this manner, he shook the mood off and went back inside as well. Thereupon, Miss Frederica Lounds bumped into him, spilling the whole contents of her wine glass down the Viscount’s impeccable shirtfront.

“Oh, no, how perfectly dreadful!” The bashful Beta, daughter of Lady Lecter’s dear friend Lady Matilda Lounds, had long red ringlets and wore round spectacles which made her look like a nervous owl.

Miss Lounds tried to clean the wine off of her host with a napkin, intimidated by his Lordship’s entire silence, a mode of consternation she would prefer, he assumed, to him speaking his mind.

Finally, he had enough of this nonsense and brushed her off. As he left, he muttered, “Don’t trouble yourself, Miss Lounds,” determined to have his last dance, wine-soaked shirt or not.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: More Hannigram bickering and sass, plus a large and adorable dog who bring chaos and revelaton 🐶

moodswings (to come at me like that)

Chapter Summary

I reread the equivalent parts of the novel "The Viscount Who Loved Me" (which I highly recommend!). In there, I remembered that there is this whole other part (after the ball from my Chapter 2) where Kate and Anthony have a confusing and disastrous encounter with each other and a huge dog with bad timing. How could I *not* include a Hannigram version here? 🐶🌊😵💫 (😄)

So as a result, the *next* big scene, which is the scandalous action between our boys at the Lecters' "musicale" night, will be in the following chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miss Tattletale's Society Scandals
June 7, 1814

My dear readers,
It appears that Lady Bedelia Du Maurier's current protege and the Glittering Gem of our Season herself, Miss Margot Verger, has become the unintended victim of a dreadful melee.

While this writer was not present to record all of the gruesome details, it has become notoriously well-known throughout the London Ton that the following regrettable events took place yesterday afternoon:

At some point, Miss Verger's adopted brother, Mr. Will Graham, was in Hyde Park, walking with Viscount Hannibal Lecter in the direction of the Serpentine. For reasons unknown.

Mr. Graham apparently encountered a large, mangy and highly questionable dog. He attempted to render it aid.

Next, by accident or intention, they encountered Miss Verger, who had obliged the charmingly roguish Mr. Anthony Dimmond with her companionship for a carriage ride. They had also chosen to walk in the park, as one does, and the strange, unaccountable beast which had been so tenderly advocated for by Mr. Graham charged directly into Miss Verger.

(What a way to make a first impression. We have never been less in doubt that Miss Verger is thoroughly charming and irresistible to all, including the animal kingdom, apparently.)

The dog had knocked Miss Verger into the water, where she was eagerly retrieved by the Viscount. His Lordship was heard railing in an infuriated manner at both the Strange Dog and Mr. Graham, blaming them both for the dreadful catastrophe.

In short, Miss Verger's beautiful afternoon tea dress was ruined in the cold, dirty water (the Serpentine is so stubbornly English that it is never really warm, even in summer) and in front of many Ton members strolling the area. Almost as bad as the loss of the dress is poor Miss Verger's current condition, on bedrest with a cold from her spill.

It is not difficult to ascertain the reason for the Viscount's clearly mounting enmity towards Miss Verger's brother. This is the second time the reckless Omega has been responsible for putting a wedge between Miss Verger and his Lordship. If only the Viscount had encountered Miss Verger without the trouble-making dog present, what a lovely meeting they might have enjoyed!

Interestingly, matters appeared to be weighted in the other way at first, as Mr. Graham was angered and offended by some comments made by the Viscount at the ball. However, the Viscount himself now seems to despise Mr. Graham in return, to the extent that the feud is more balanced, though certainly not neat.

Curious and curiouser,
Miss Tattletale

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Chapter three: moodswings (to come at me like that)

"*I've been feeling everything*
From hate to love
From love to lust
From lust to truth
I guess that's how I know you" - Ed Sheeran

JAQUES: let's meet as little as we can.

ORLANDO: *I do desire we may be better strangers*. -William Shakespeare, *As You Like it*

***

Margot received a message from Lady Bedelia upon the morrow, promptly after their usual breakfast time. In other words, that moment in the day wherein Will congratulated himself on having a comparatively peaceful, pleasant set of hours ahead of him. A whole day, he enthused to himself, with absolutely no Viscount Hannibal Lecter in it. What could inspire more gratitude to every god, every movement of fate or destiny that had so conspired to set him free after the horrifically dreadful ordeal known as "the ball"?

If that was an indication of a typical opening night for the London season, then I am confirmed in my suspicion that I shall loathe the experience. Aside from guarding my sister's interests, I simply must abstain from all such evil events.

Poor Will, not one of his joyous hopes came to pass. With a single slip of paper in Margot's delicate hand, his whole twenty-four hours changed its course. And a day spent distributing his pamphlets to mostly grumpy, unreceptive or even rude citizens, followed by plenty of self-reflection and trying (probably failing) to smother his feelings about the dreadful

Viscount was off the table. What a shame, Will's plan to nobly suffer in silence and solitude while despising his own awkward manners and his ridiculous temper was canceled, along with it the much-anticipated opportunity to allow his Omegan desires to keep intensifying without any relief in sight.

Pondering one's own doomed sexual, romantic and familial needs was always a worthy pastime, so his face fell after Margot read the following missive:

My dear Margot,
I really must insist that you and Will come and stay with me for the remainder of the season. Settle up with your current lodging fees and come along to Stow House, post-haste. You see, it has become obvious that Viscount Lecter is intent on visiting you to begin his formal courtship. And I ought to have anticipated this necessity; however, my obligations to the late Lord Du Maurier's relatives have run me positively ragged. I feel distinctly absent-minded.

"Or it might be all the wine," Will mused with an upward cast of his eyes. "And then all the wine after *that.*"

Margot raised her eyebrows with a small smile, and kept reading:

We cannot have the wealthiest Alpha aristocrat in Town visiting you in that lackluster little hovel which currently holds you in its slovenly grip. You really needn't even pack, as I have already made arrangements for your every need – and even those of…your brother. Out of necessity. The poor dear.

"*The poor dear?*" Will repeated, aghast. He dropped his spoon into his porridge and splashed a sizable amount of it on his shirt. "The only thing worse than sincere pity for my mere existence is insincere pity."

Your loving and highly invested hostess,
Lady Bedelia Du Maurier

Margot put the letter down and shrugged. "I'm sorry, Will, she is quite thoughtless in her attitude towards you. You also shouldn't mistake her so-called solicitude towards me for affection or any particular investment beyond an obligation to Mama. The fact of her attachment to Mama is the one and only quality in her Ladyship that makes me hold out hope. Perhaps she will prove the supportive and caring friend we so badly need in these days. But if only she would be more attentive and sensitive… regarding…"

"Yes. My mere *existence.*" Will stabbed at his porridge, almost grateful for the subject change, as it afforded a glorious distraction from the "Viscount Lecter" novel that seemed to be turning its pages unceasingly in his mind. But unfortunately, the letter's subject matter seemed as if it would catapult Will right back to the belly of the beast.

"Shame about that," he pouted. "But what do I expect?"

"Expect better out of people." Margot shook her head, sympathetic but firm. "You allow the opinions of those you are insulted or neglected by to form your own of yourself, which only encourages them when you become prickly and difficult. I hate that you're put in this

position, although you do play into the Ton's attempt to consider you obscured in my shadow. Rest assured, as soon as I am married, I shall see you comfortably settled and in peace."

"Thank you, dear sister, but as for the part about taking the opinions of others as my own… what does that mean?" Will's brow creased.

"You don't even *like* Lady Bedelia, but you take on and shoulder her disinterested, dismissive attitude towards you as if it were suddenly the gospel truth."

"Not so sudden." Glowering, Will ate the rest of his porridge, finding the bottom of the bowl too soon as his stomach still rumbled.

"I have never seen you in any such light. Come, we must prepare." Margot's eyes twinkled with excitement.

No time for a second bowl of porridge, then.

"We really must go? And you insist on letting that awful Lord Lecter court you?"

"I need to be married and have this whole obligation over and done with. I see no finer prospect than the Viscount. Grandfather will be so shocked by my impressive match that I may not have to hear from him for months, imagine that amount of bliss. It is surely a fair trade for your potentially having to be polite to an Alpha you despise."

Will genuinely hesitated. That was more than a fair point, but he was notably inclined to unfairness when it came to that particular Alpha. He gestured with his hand, indicating *"perhaaaappssssss…?"*

"Will Graham, no favorite brother of mine is going to suggest that a single person upon this planet is as unbearable as my grandfather."

Will sighed. "There are many different ways to be unbearable."

Margot scoffed prettily. "Really. Please. I don't want to bring my other so-called brother up, but…"

"Yes, Mason is beyond unbearable and makes Grandfather appear to be thoroughly benign. If London already believes me a vapid and pushy brute, I can imagine their reaction to Mason. They almost deserve it, but no one actually deserves Mason. Yet I only mean that…some other terrible people…um…they simply…"

"Are annoyingly *handsome?* Too rich and intelligent, too accommodating and pleasant? Will, is there some unmentioned reason why I ought to reject the Viscount's suit?"

"No. No reasons that have gone unmentioned. Are you not concerned that his Lordship is so pleasant when with you, and treats me abominably? It is obviously underhanded and manipulative. You have no reason to suspect that a man so dishonest will not turn around and be the most controlling, despicable spouse once the vows are said."

Margot stood and put her napkin down on the table with an arch look. “I shall have to witness this reputably abominable treatment before I entirely believe your account.”

“Perfect. I’m quite sure he cannot come in my presence without exhibiting his true self, prime evil personified.” Will smirked triumphantly, which may have been ever so slightly premature.

He went to his room to gather a few of his necessities, too precious to part with, such as his stack of pamphlets for the Omegan cause, the set of combs and brushes that had been his father’s, and…

As he rummaged through his drawers, he came across the dance card from the ball, with the Viscount’s name on it in his own hand. Before he realized what he was about, he found himself going pink in the face as sweat prickled on his skin and he stroked a finger down the dance card slowly.

His breath caught as the sound of Margot calling him interrupted his bizarre trance. Lady Bedelia’s carriage was already waiting for them outside.

“How absolutely and unacceptably *ridiculous,”* he snapped, angry with himself but also with his Lordship, as it was a foregone conclusion that this, too, must be Lecter’s fault. Somehow.

Will folded the silly dance card in half and placed it in the small trash receptacle next to the bureau. He carried his old, faded traveling bag out of the room, but dropped it on the floor after taking a few steps into the hall.

Cursing under his breath, he rushed back to his room, grabbed the offending dance card, and tucked it safely into his waistcoat, over his heart. He could attempt to discern what in the name of all things unholy he meant by such conduct later.

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“Stow House,” Will grumbled, “Sounds like someplace one is locked away in, forgotten and never again seen by the outside world.”

“Shush, silly thing.” Margot rolled her eyes as Will handed her out of the carriage. “Please allow people and places a chance to please you before dismissing them out of hand. You are probably getting into the habit of poisoning your own perception at this rate.”

Will stared up at the enormous, stately manor house and groaned. “How dare you speak plain truth and give me good advice?”

“What a beautiful and majestic place!” Margot seized her brother’s arm, bubbling with delight at the change in their lodgings. “I can hardly wait to get inside, so that her Ladyship can lock you in the attic.”

“You’re funny,” Will retorted wryly. “Hilarious.”

The footmen arrived to take their two small bags, and then they were ushered into a pure white entrance hall where the art consisted of still life flowers and fruit. The rather sedate, yet

spectacular place seemed to defy its own size and grandeur by way of its sufficient, but bland decor. All of the rooms they walked through were white, as well, and many more painted bowls of apples and chrysanthemums awaited them.

"*Pears*, this time," Will remarked, cupping his chin as if seriously observing the art when they had arrived in her Ladyship's sitting room. "Hmm. Fascinating."

Margot kicked his ankle in warning.

"*Ouch,*" he muttered as she whispered, "Behave," in no uncertain terms.

"Lovely, aren't they, sir?" The young Beta maid's cockney accent and innocent enthusiasm soured Will's cynicism somewhat.

"Yes, quite so, Becky," he answered warmly. "Thank you ever so much for giving us a tour of the place. It's a great honor to be here."

"Quite! Her Ladyship is a most benevolent employer, if somewhat cold and secretive." The girl adjusted her little white cap and blushed. "Hell's bells, I promised Mama that I would stop being so frightfully forward and honest, and there I go again. Only just met you two gentlepeople, and I'm talkin' away as if you're Agnes the scullery maid and Vicar Albert is giving another of his frightfully dull sermons during Sunday service…Oh, no…"

Becky's green eyes grew large as she realized that her instinctive honesty had reared its head again. Margot stifled a giggle and Will grinned.

"Please, never apologize for being candid with us, Becky. I find your open account of things to be quite refreshing. The London Ton can often be so artificial, I find."

"Pessimist," Margot chided as she surveyed the large gardens with their intriguing topiaries through the window. There seemed to be one shaped like a bunch of grapes.

"Idealist," Will said tartly.

Margot's deep rose pink tea dress stood out in bold contrast to the pale shade of the curtains and wall, making her look even more naturally striking than usual.

"Indeed they can be quite cold and unfriendly to us workin' class folk at times, Mr. Graham," Becky agreed sagely. "But if I may name an exception, the Lecter family are surprisingly down to earth and kindly for all they're even richer than her Ladyship."

"Yes." Will pursed his lips but admitted, "*Lady Lecter and Lady Gracefield* could not be more cordial, the epitome of kindness and gentility."

Margot noted his omission of the Viscount from this description and shook her head before sitting in the chair opposite her brother. Between them, Becky was retying her apron in a neater bow as she considered the matter.

Finally, the made brightened up as if she'd just remembered a delightful fact. "And of course, *Lord Lecter,* the Viscount, is the most generous and wonderful gentleman one could meet. So

handsome, besides, for all he's far too old for me. I wish I had a few ranks up the social ladder and a younger version of the Viscount to court me, I don't mind sayin'."

Will groaned in exhausted dismay as Margot beamed.

"Exactly," Margot confirmed. "Did you hear that, Will?"

Before her brother could issue a worthy (and therefore jaded) reply, Her Ladyship entered with a resigned demeanor, wearing an elegant dress in her trademark shade of ice blue.

"That will be all for now, Rebecca," she said, her nose crinkling slightly at the girl's crooked curtsey as the maid bade them a good day.

"Forgive her babbling tongue, I beseech you," Lady Bedelia said, as if bearing with the maid's innocent, harmless chatter was a matter of great sacrifice on her part. "She's a good young girl and a fine worker, but she does go on."

"It's no trouble at all, your Ladyship," Margot enthused. "And we are immensely grateful to your generosity in having us stay with you for the rest of the Season. I only hope we make you proud at the upcoming events."

"One certainly does hope." Lady Bedelia smoothed out her skirt and then patted her silky, pale blonde hair. "And speaking of knowing when to hold one's tongue, I expect you to be on your best behavior when the Viscount visits your sister, young Mr. Graham."

"Excuse me? When was my behavior ever a problem when it comes to that gentleman?" Will was rather offended.

"Your first interaction with the Viscount was so notoriously unfriendly that it made its way into Miss Tattletale's gossip papers. This is a very poor beginning to what I believe is fated to be a beautiful courtship between your dear sister and the most desirable bachelor of the Ton."

"Lady Bedelia, after all I've heard today upon the subject, I intend to follow your edict precisely," Will replied. "As a matter of fact, I can hardly wait to see the Viscount again, so that I may demonstrate my most exquisite manners and perfect politeness. Let him show you who he really is, and you'll stop placing the blame for our dispute at my door."

Her Ladyship exchanged sly glances with Margot. "I suppose this is an acceptable plan, considering that he promises to be polite."

"It's certainly the best we are going to get, so I for one am going to embrace it." Margot looked pleased as punch, a sight that was almost enough to make Will glad that his new approach made her smile.

Margot deserved happiness, which would come from choosing the right spouse. Will supposed he must sacrifice his dignity and eat his humble pie, if only to exonerate his own thoroughly innocent conscience from the strange accusations of Lady Bedelia, Margot, Miss Tattletale, the Viscount himself, and a large quantity of fellow London Ton.

He would make them all see. But first…

“Is it going to be teatime soon?” He asked, trying not to sound petulant (a challenge). “I am famished and need my energy to confront the Viscount whenever he should call.”

Lady Bedelia rang for tea, adding an order for her “morning cordial,” also known as a hearty serving of sherry.

Will had no idea when his new, smooth cotton shirt had begun to itch his skin, but it was making him fiercely uncomfortable at present. He knew it was too hot in the room as well, and wondered at her Ladyship’s neglect in airing the place out during the thick of summer.

However, he was so pleased with the array of slender, savory cucumber and roast beef sandwiches, and a splendid selection of delectable scones that he was then disposed to be almost merry. He could have squealed with glee when he smeared clotted cream all over the top of a cherry scone with chocolate chips in it.

They were, after all, to be staying in the lap of luxury. From within the upper ranks of the Ton (or, at least, among them), Will would have a better opportunity to educate those who would be inclined to listen, as to Omegan rights. Furthermore, he and Margot were obviously going to be well-dressed and looking very fine, which for some reason Will could not help thinking of, in regard to the Viscount. He supposed that he wanted to look so refined that the Viscount would have to admit he was not a wild, “rascal” Omegan brat after all. That must be it.

And he was going to be *eating* better than ever, really, all considered. He and Margot had been living on a consistent diet of porridge, bread-and-butter, and stew for more years than he could quite recall. These were the easiest foods to make last in sufficient amounts when one was noble, yet on a shoestring budget, and in the country where supplies were limited to the simple.

He felt proud of himself for looking on the bright side, and decided to continue showcasing his brilliant ability to do so, wondering when and how (not if!) the Viscount would slip up and reveal his evil nature to Margot and Lady Bedelia. The moment, when it arrived, would be a sweet victory, indeed.

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Hannibal’s week started well enough, as he made a point of stopping by Lady Bedelia’s in order to inquire where he might call upon her protege, Miss Verger. This was a successful visit, as her Ladyship indicated that Miss Verger would be staying at Stow House beginning on that very afternoon. He decided to give his intended time to settle into her new lodgings, without really questioning where she had been living prior.

All this being done well, he decided to turn over a new leaf with regard to Miss Verger’s brother. It would not do to alienate the most important ally to his courtship, and after all, one did not want to have in-laws for enemies.

It would be ungenteel, if not downright uncouth.

Hannibal was disappointed when he dropped by Stow House the following morning to discover that Miss Verger was not only out, but with another gentleman. However, when

Lady Bedelia gave him to understand that the man in question was Anthony Dimmond, Hannibal's stiff posture relaxed slightly and he was able to take some tea in relative peace.

Anthony had no intention of marrying (the mere idea was actually hilarious) and was likely more of a friend to Margot. He would never dare to seduce a lady whom Hannibal had already claimed as a future wife.

Most people knew better than to defy the mighty Viscount, but what's more, they didn't really think of doing so. He was beloved among all of the Ton and up until now had never encountered outright enmity in their ranks.

But as he sat in the awkward company of Will Graham, with no other support but Lady Bedelia, who was hardly a solid barrier to the boy's inevitable attacks, Hannibal was distinctly aware that he had acquired an enemy.

Will was behaving with the most eloquent and remarkable good manners, as if all was forgiven and forgotten. However, Hannibal had not been born yesterday. He detected a distinctly nefarious, sarcastic glimmer in those big blue eyes that unsettled him. Will was having him on, in an attempt to prove himself innocent in their previous argument and make others blame Hannibal. Imagine! As if anyone would believe Hannibal was the culprit in such a matter.

While it was a Herculean labor to avoid being snide towards the self-important brat, Hannibal took some pleasure in vigorously returning the boy's false, excessive smiles and kind words. Whenever their gazes collided, now he could sense Will's frustration. He had a long wait if he thought he could prove Hannibal a villain and thereby thwart the Viscount's courtship of his sister.

There was the added difficulty of Will's blasted, intoxicating *scent*, which seemed to mix with the boy's inappropriate defiance to arouse Hannibal, even more upon this second meeting.

He worried that if he was going to see Will regularly, he might gradually lose his ability to control himself. Unfortunately, while he had always prided himself on his imperviousness to Omegan body chemistry and the primal call to mating, truth be told…he had heard that every Alpha had one Omega who would instantly make him weak in the knees and tight in the trousers. Why must he meet his, now, at this age and time of life, determined to avoid any emotional entanglements or scandals, and wanting only to wed a sensible Beta and settle down?

Why must his weakness come in the form of his would-be fiance's brother? What awful crime had he ever committed in a past life to deserve this potential catastrophe?

It was slightly comforting that Will seemed deeply uncomfortable in his presence as well. Hannibal could not tell if it was a reciprocal response to his Alpha scent and powerful presence, or merely deep loathing (or both, possibly, for that matter). But Will was shifting around in his seat as if he could not stay still whatsoever, and he kept tugging at his collar. His complexion seemed quite flushed, and he must be perspiring because the sweat was heightening the potency of his scent.

Hannibal did his best to remain present in the conversation, despite being engulfed in the scent of candy apples, cherry blossoms and burnt sugar sprinkled on lemons. He could never have explained or described the smell to anyone else, how it felt as if candy apples grew on trees clustered with pink blossoms, how the dark sweetness combined with bright tartness of lemons to burst across his olfactory palate and make him feel distinctly insane.

The devil take it, why did the boy have to be so atrociously sensuous and beautiful? It was a genuine wonder, verging almost on an actual concern or worry, that Will was not constantly harassed by those Alphas who fit the worst stereotypes of aggressive seduction. He could barely comprehend how anyone could be calm in this boy's infuriating presence. Every movement and word from Will Graham was a separate torment, all soft lips and teasing hints of his perfect pink tongue. Then there were those eyes, angry and defensive, but inexperienced. Clearer crystal blue than the ocean, and deeper, he feared. Far more deadly.

He had to try hard not to look at or consider the boy's body. He could barely suppress and silence his mad desire to lap up the sweet scent from every gland, to glide his tongue along the boy's neck and kiss his cheeks, feeling his heat as the scent drowned him over and over. He wanted to lick it from Will's pretty, slender wrists. He wanted to bury his face between Will's thighs and taste his slick, licking it from warm, wet folds and sliding his tongue inside the boy, making Will scream. He could stay there forever, doing nothing more than performing endless oral sex on the boy, he realized, and be happy.

Which was *not* the plan!

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A short time later, after Will had peppered the brief conversation with compliments and unleashed his sweetest smile while anger squeezed his heart and churned his stomach, Lady Bedelia stood languidly and made an announcement.

"Well, I must take my leave of you both at present. Time for my nap." She yawned delicately, patting her lips as Will and Hannibal momentarily landed on the same page, exchanging panicked looks.

The Viscount gulped, "Are you sure, your Ladyship, that I cannot convince you to stay?"

"Yes!" Will echoed. He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair. "Um, please stay and keep talking with us."

"You're both terribly sweet, but I am devoted to my routine. My late morning nap helps my afternoon glow to truly shine, after all." She curtsied to them both and exchanged pleasantries before emptying the room of all safety and nearly even the memory of safety.

"Well." Hannibal looked at Will with an unsettled expression. "I suppose…"

"You must have many other calls to make, my Lord," Will put in, giving him an excuse to run from this encounter, basically.

“I do not, as it happens. I cleared my morning schedule in hopes of visiting Miss Margot.” The Alpha took in Will’s baffled expression. “You think it strange that I am not bolting away from you? But that would be a poor way to begin our relationship as brothers-in-law.”

“Good Gods, I shall certainly never be your anything, brother included. You are surely mad to project acceptance before even getting to know my sister, much less proposing.”

Hannibal huffed a snobbish laugh. “If I propose to your sister, she will say yes. We both know that. Let’s dispense with the niceties and formalities for a few moments. I can admit I behaved with condescending arrogance at the ball, when you behaved with such overwrought and melodramatic defensiveness.”

“You…admit that you were rude and mean, but at the same time, you remind me that I was immature and paranoid?”

“Just so. See, you understand. I had good reason to become slightly churlish; however, the hands of the Gods may be at work in leaving us alone together for the morning. It’s time we tried to be friends, since that’s what is best for Miss Margot.”

“Oh-*ho-ho,* you are truly the greatest, most entitled snob in all of England!" Will stood with his hands on his hips. “Would it shock you to know that I do not wish to be your friend? I don’t care for friends who mock and degrade me. And Margot would not wish such a husband, fond as she is of me.”

He glared at Hannibal’s now cross expression. “I intend to go out for a long walk, in the hope that you will no longer be here upon my return.”

“You reject my offer of friendship?” Hannibal fumed, chasing Will outside and keeping pace as Will walked quickly down the sidewalk.

Will groaned, “I reject every part of you, my Lord.”

Repressing another groan, Will fought to conceal his natural reaction to the Viscount’s nearness and scent. It would hardly do to give into the temptation to touch and taste the man’s smooth, golden skin and show himself quite the silly floozy which Omegas were often supposed to be.

The hot day was obviously no help when it came to his Omegan instincts. Thank Gods *this* explained his near-constant sweating (which might have been embarrassing, had he cared in the least about his companion’s opinion of him) and fidgety mood. It was only the heat of the sun, after all, and not his own pre-heat emerging at the worst possible time.

All he could do was pray for a typical English rainstorm, the sort of summer shower that usually broke the heat when it became unbearable as it was now.

Please, stop being jolly old England and be the miserably grey, cloudy, misty England. Please?

For as they walked down the sun-baked sidewalk, passing other people out and about on their daily errands and visits, and as the Viscount greeted those he knew with the usual easy charm and a tip of his hat, the heat caused Will's keen awareness of the Alpha's leather-and-whiskey scent to mount ever more treacherously.

He hated the way Hannibal looked in that bloody fashionable black hat, which he wore at a slightly rakish angle, obviously calculated to appear like effortless style. He despised the light layer of sweat he saw on Hannibal's tanned skin, where his cravat ended and left his handsome, strong throat half-displayed. The gleam of his healthy, robust complexion and the fact of his constant display of competence in everything he did were making Will truly *wretched.*

The glands near Hannibal's stunning jawline were releasing ever more overpowering pheromones right in Will's direction, and for no better reason than the older man's stubborn insistence on accompanying him and trying to mend fences that ought to remain thoroughly demolished.

Was Hannibal intentionally allowing his scent to be so excruciatingly omnipresent? Will knew damn well that Alphas could control their scents best out of the three races, and he was prepared to issue a thrashing if Hannibal was trying to intimidate and defeat him in such a brutish manner.

Yet the older man's expression remained steady in a light smile as more greetings and compliments rained down upon him each time an acquaintance strolled by. He was certainly tense; Will resented having to know it so profoundly, but it couldn't be helped; he could pick up the feeling of conflict and hesitation from the scent of him, and it hurt. He felt an obnoxious desire to find the reason for Hannibal's inner conflict and why the Viscount was only faking these delighted smiles as they walked along.

He wanted nothing more than to soothe the Alpha and solve whatever the problem was so that Hannibal felt better again. By all the stars, this was not to be borne! The humiliating, irresistible thrall and draw of the powerful Alpha was undeniable – at least within Will's own mind. He would hide it with all his might, of course. Hannibal was the sort of Alpha all Omegas craved in their heart of hearts: handsome, virile, amorous and quick to anger, protective, possessive and devoted to his closest loved ones. A family man through and through, while proudly showing off all of these traits, demonstrated through successful and impressive conquering of every task, every conversation and encounter. Any Omega would be deeply conscious of Hannibal's sexual prowess by being this close, and it would be downright rude for Will to move to a safer distance.

Why did he care about being rude, though? He despised the man. But then Will realized, to his even greater annoyance, that he was being eyed up shamelessly by quite a few bold Alphas they passed on their directionless, contentious walk through Town. And he knew he was pressing ever closer to Hannibal's side because it made him feel protected, immersed in the older man's strength and even his superiority.

Some little voice in Will murmured, ***my*** *Alpha is the best of them all, no other compares. No one can ever hurt me now.*

Aware that he was by now almost fully hypnotized, Will bit down on his own lip harshly, drawing blood, attempting to snap out of it.

Did the Viscount have to be such an *Alpha,* damn it all? Could he not tone it down a bit?

“Of course I can’t,” Hannibal replied, rolling his eyes and making Will aware that he’d spoken the last complaint aloud without even meaning to. “I’m already controlling my scent as best I can. Given your pronounced distrust of Alphas in general, and myself especially, I would never have predicted that my *Alpha*-ness would affect you in the least.”

“Well, *your Royal Alpha-ness*, it just so happens that I am only human, and as prey to the primal underpinnings of my Omegan nature as anyone else. Therefore, I may have involuntary responses to you at times. You are hereby commanded to disregard them completely, under pain of death.”

Hannibal laughed affably. “You are a hot-blooded little thing, aren’t you? I am sorry, but your temper begins to amuse me immensely.”

“You think I can’t make good on my threats?” Will glowered as they reached a corner and turned onto the road stretching towards the Serpentine.

“I think you’ve let me remain by your side, and you’ve followed any course I chose to follow on this walk, not out of politeness but out of the same instinct you claim to despise. And if you could place your anger aside for a moment, perhaps it would behoove you to consider what lies beneath it.”

“We may as well continue to Hyde Park,” Will snarled, making a point of being the one to lead for a few paces, and to map their journey.

After he managed to tie down his riotous feelings, ranging from fury to desperate arousal and an overall sense of anxious, dreading confusion, Will regained his composure.

Catching up with him easily, Hannibal peered at his face as they approached the tall, open gates to the park.

“You’re *bleeding,* Wi– that is, Mr. Graham.” There was concern in the Alpha’s tone that might be mistaken as genuine, if Will was not on guard.

“Oh, that. It’s nothing.” Will licked his lip reflexively, and immediately thereafter discovered the Viscount close by his side, as if he intended to bend his head and thoroughly scent Will.

“My *neck* is uninjured, I assure you,” he added in clear admonishment that caused Hannibal to perhaps realize what he was doing and step away.

“Ahem. That is a relief. Shall we? It’s a pleasant-looking day, despite this unfortunate heat and humidity.”

Hannibal gestured with his walking stick to the main path ahead, and Will nodded. It felt good, obeying his – *no*, this Alpha. When he could do so without the reason being too apparent, he found himself following the Viscount’s commands.

It was a splendid day, as Hannibal had noted, so long as one ignored the air, thick with oppressive heat.

“The humidity is actually a good sign,” he said aloud, trying to establish a “normal” conversation with Will. “It will probably break quite soon with a rainstorm that will cool the air.” His line of thinking mirrored Will’s from a few minutes before.

“Wonderful news for all of these lovely flowers as well,” Will smiled absent-mindedly, transfixed at the natural beauty of the park. “Forgive me, it is my first time here, and I’ve hardly ever seen such an exquisite garden. We'd only passed the park by in the carriage, up until now.”

Hannibal also smiled when Will stopped to thoughtfully smell and admire the bright flowers, which were unusually still instead of swaying in the breeze of a cooler day.

“Red poppies, blue cornflowers and white ox-eye daisies…” Will’s voice trailed off as he named the blossoms and stroked their soft petals. “Even more beautiful for being wild and natural flowers.”

Hannibal was silent for a few moments longer than he usually would be, and then he answered pensively. “You’re entirely in the right. However, if you enjoy flowers, you really should visit the rose garden sometime. It’s on the other side of the park, so it is better when you arrive to come through that gate.”

“This is the most enormous park I’ve ever seen,” Will said, looking around with wonderment at the large, verdant trees and yet more wildflowers ahead, including a long row of pretty violets. “But then again, I am unused to parks in general. I am far more accustomed to farms.”

“I’m sure the quiet, country life has some appeal.”

“It has many charms, although the food isn’t as good as it is here in London.” Will had forgotten to hold back his shy smiles.

Hannibal laughed softly. “That is a great tragedy.”

“I *love* these,” Will said, running his hand ever so gently over the tops of the violets, finding them even softer than he’d expected. “I should like to sleep in a bed made up of violets like this.”

His wistfulness earned him an admiring glance from the Viscount. But the comment was so personal that he wished he had not said it. It was past time Will got back to business.

“My Lord,” he began, as his serious expression and accusing gaze made Hannibal groan automatically and start walking onward.

Following him with sprightly vigor, Will continued, “Since you seem determined to court my sister despite my disapproval and the fact that you are a renowned rake who will never change his colors for so paltry a reason as matrimony, then I would spend a bit more time in

your company to get to know you better. Not to befriend you, but to make a better enemy of you."

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?" Hannibal chuckled. "That is fair enough, I suppose. Though, what do you know of rakes, anyhow? One look at you and a whiff, since *I* also cannot avoid *your* scent, tells me that you are completely guileless, inexperienced and pure. You've never been *kissed*, much less intimately touched. Perhaps you overblow the temptations in your mind due to their potency as you feel it, but *I* am quite able to abstain from constant affairs, if I so choose."

"'*If I so choose,*'" Will mimicked irritably. He plucked at the itchy shirt that was beginning to stick to his skin with the heat, and when he glanced at Hannibal again, he found darkening amber eyes resting heavy on his neck.

Do not swoon. It's nothing but base, animalistic instinct.

"Yes...If I so choose." Distracted, Hannibal paused as they reached a clearing where two large trees met to form a heart shape overhead, with the vivid blue sky held inside the heart.

A picturesque sight, but Will could not see anything whatsoever except for the Alpha who now leaned on his walking stick and smirked wickedly at the younger man.

"Would you like me to illuminate the matter for you? As a newcomer to the adult world, there is a certain *education* which will be required for you to truly mature past the status of a whining teenaged boy."

Will was going to *illuminate* it for him by snatching his walking stick and thrashing him with it, but then his focus was finally broken by a large, slobbering dog who went merrily trotting by them.

The young Omega grinned, forgetting his anger for the moment, as the sight of a friendly dog always lightened and warmed his heart.

"Hello!" he called, walking swiftly to trail the solitary creature, who was a shaggy, dirty mess, but seemed to be joyously oblivious. "Hello, there! Who's a good boy, then?"

The dog, delighted to be addressed after a long morning of wandering the neighborhood only to be disdained and avoided by the wealthy population, immediately turned and bolted at Will, jumping on his legs so fast and heavily, it almost knocked the Omega to the ground.

"What on earth can you be about, touching that mangy beast?" Hannibal appeared nearby, his lofty attitude now making Will laugh.

"Perhaps it's merely the bond between us mangy beasts," he reasoned, petting the dog's soft head, ruffling tan and dark brown fur.

"He's scratching up your legs and drooling on you," Hannibal chided.

He *hated* to think of Will's doubtless pretty and pale legs being reddened with scratches from the dog, and hated that he hated it.

“I don’t mind, and he’s just hungry and thirsty.” Will said this without looking at Hannibal. To the dog, he added, “Here, now, have you a collar? No, dear? How odd.”

He clucked his tongue as Hannibal asked, “Why should that be odd? He looks as if he *rolled* here from the King’s Cross Dust-heap.”

“He’s a Leonberger,” Will explained, smiling gently as he crouched in front of the dog to examine him further. “They’re German dogs, known as gentle giants. It’s rare to see them in England, and still rarer that one should be wandering around unclaimed. Poor darling, I’ll take you home with me and give you something to eat and drink. I’ll take care of you, won’t I? Good boy!”

Hannibal lingered with palpable aggravation at discovering what exactly caused Will to smile and speak so sweetly. The mighty Viscount was now being ignored, even as his own primal urges kept getting more intense, such as being *jealous* of an oversized feather duster with paws.

But he did not like to see Will grinning in such a beautiful, intoxicating manner, when it was never to be directed at him. He furthermore *loathed* the sight of Will’s affectionate pets and strokes, and the way Will calmed the animal with kind, soft and adorable encouragement. Will never touched *Hannibal* that way.

And he obviously never will! Considering the fact that we barely know one another, we hate what we do know, and I’m to marry his sister!

Hannibal frowned resentfully at Will's new friend. “You can’t take *that* to Stow House, what will Lady Bedelia say?”

Will said confidently, “There is a very nice maid named Becky there, who will be happy to help me get this darling squeaky clean and to give him food and water. Goliath here will soon be sparkling, immaculate and respectable. I’m sure I could convince Her Ladyship to let me keep him, so long as I keep him away from *her* at all times.”

“Goliath?” Hannibal repeated stonily.

“Yes, it suits him, don’t you think? You like that, Goliath? What a good boy…”

Will’s eyes were bright pools of cerulean, and his smile could have lit up the darkest night sky. His innocent exuberance pierced Hannibal’s heart.

“You have a great love of dogs, then,” he suggested, unable to cloak his interest in learning more about Will.

“I *adore* them, even though we weren’t allowed to keep any while my aunt and uncle -- uh, that is, Margot’s parents, were alive, and we could not afford another mouth to feed after their deaths. I always wanted to have a large pack to love and care for one day. Dogs keep promises that people don’t.”

“Loyalty, affection, commitment.” Hannibal sat upon a bench and continued watching the boy and dog. “Are these traits so rare among your own family?”

“No. But all I’ve got now is Margot. Without her, I’d be alone in the world. Too untrusting to let strangers in, and too *poor* to be of interest to most people anyway.”

“You are less alone in the world now,” Hannibal pointed out.

“Yes. I think so.” Will gave him a tiny smile over the dog’s massive head.

“You and I have more in common than you may believe. I know all too well the pain of losing a parent. I’m sorry for your family's losses, and…glad that you and Miss Verger remained close and supported each other.”

The sincerity in Hannibal’s tone made Will’s attitude soften even more. “Thank you, my Lord, I am grateful of it as well. And sorry for your own loss. I have heard nothing but the highest praise of the late Viscount Lecter’s character. Perhaps we–”

He paused upon hearing his own name being called in a very familiar voice, that of Margot herself. He straightened up and glanced across a small, grassy field to see his sister waving at him and the Viscount.

“What a fortuitous coincidence,” Hannibal remarked with a delighted smile that made Will forget the brief lapse into friendliness that had just occurred.

He wished he could stomp on the older man’s foot, but settled for an icy glare which went entirely ignored and unheeded.

However, before they could meet Margot and Mr. Dimmond in the middle of the field between them, Goliath seemed to catch on that the pretty young lady who smiled so charmingly was a friend, too. He therefore took off at a shocking gallop and caused Margot to laugh apprehensively and take a few steps back, unknowingly towards the water’s edge.

Within the next breath, as Will, Hannibal and Anthony looked on in surprised horror, Goliath had pounced on Margot and knocked her right into the water! There, he proceeded to playfully nose at her and try to lick her as soon as her head emerged, coughing, with a very displeased expression.

“I can’t believe you caused such a terrible thing to happen to your sister,” Hannibal scolded Will. “The wretched dog would not have been *with* us to knock the lady down, had you not made such a point of befriending it.”

They both ran to Margot, where Anthony and Hannibal flung off their jackets and worked together to help her out from under Goliath, and out of the cold and dirty water. She was significantly heavier due to her soaked skirts, and it was an awkward business.

Will had to stand by the side holding the jackets and feeling even more ridiculous as a result of becoming the servant by default. But really, it was only what he was used to: as a “frail” Omega, he was the last one anyone would consider helpful at a time like this.

In the process, both men became nearly as wet as Margot, and Will was forced to avert his eyes from the sight of Hannibal's white shirt, rendered transparent by the water which had it sticking to his strong pectorals and firm middle. Will could not help a heightened, uncomfortable awareness of the Viscount's silver chest hair. As if it were not bad enough that Hannibal had the sculpted musculature of a god, he also had a full, flourishing *rug* beneath his shirt.

Such a manly feature, in addition to the rest of his exquisite physique, emphasized his Alpha virility. Under such circumstances, perhaps it wasn't even strange that Will's gaze was not drawn to Mr. Dimmond's figure, which was highly attractive and fit as well.

*No one else compares to **my** Alpha, even if they are handsome, strong and virile, they never hold a candle... What? No, no, NO–*

As his feelings and thoughts wrestled violently, making him exhausted, Will stared resolutely at the dirt beneath his feet as Goliath, unaware of his new status as a criminal, bounded over and then started running in circles around the small group.

Margot shivered and laughed, squeezing her hair out and pelting the dirt with a small waterfall. "I must have a laugh. What else can I do in the face of such absurdity? Will, please do introduce me to this fine gentleman. I assume he's a friend of yours."

Will winced and nodded. "This is Goliath. Sit, Goliath."

Despite Will's use of a firm tone, the dog merely looked at him for a few seconds and went back to running around as if he was possessed.

"I'm so sorry, Margot," Will explained. "We'd only just found him and I had no idea he'd charge you like that. He only meant to make your acquaintance, but it's clear he was never properly trained by his former owners. At his age, too. Quite shocking."

"Yes, quite," Hannibal snapped. "If only you had not been so charmed by this savage criminal of a beast at first sight. A gentle giant indeed!"

Anthony looked between the other Alpha and the young Omega, intrigued, as he wrapped his own jacket around Margot's slender shoulders. His quiet entertainment at the fiery sparks flaring every time Hannibal spoke to the lad did not go unnoticed by his old friend.

"Do contain yourself, Anthony, this is no time for your clownish nonsense." Hannibal glared, irritated that he had been too busy scolding Will to think of covering Margot with *his* jacket.

"It's *always* time for my clownish nonsense. What's got you so sensitive and prickly, my friend?" Anthony tossed him a knowing smile.

Hannibal would have to deal with Dimmond later and get him to stop teasing about the involuntary and meaningless attraction he shared (apparently) with the abominable brother of his intended.

More smoothly and like himself, Hannibal stepped forward and bowed to Margot, dripping but dignified. “I offer my services, dear lady. Let me send word to my servants and have my carriage brought here post haste. I shall convey you back to Stow House and make sure you are properly cared for.”

“How helpful and kind of you, my Lord,” Margot sniffled. “I’m thankful it is such a hot day. Had I experienced a spill like that in winter, it would be a more severe incident. I believe I just need a nice – *achoo!* bath and some dry clothes, then perhaps some rest to recover.”

“Boy. You there, boy!” Hannibal summoned a nearby servant youth and gave him several coins to fetch the carriage.

“Alright, sir and thank you kindly! I can run there in no time flat.”

Hannibal had assumed as much, while he himself had no intention of further embarrassing himself by running anywhere. “Excellent, good lad.”

The boy went racing off, and Will said poisonously, “As Margot’s brother,*I* will take care of her and make sure she recovers from her fall.”

“I think not.” Hannibal maintained his attitude of authority and dominance, knowing it would intimidate the Omega, even if Will tried to defy his compelling natural instincts. “*Mr. Dimmond* will be conveying you back to Stow House, won’t you, Anthony?”

“Of course, I’d be only too happy.” Dimmond looked as if he’d be "all too happy" to eat the pretty young Omega right up as well, in the sense of initiating a sultry affair.

But Hannibal was sure Will would not respond to such a shallow seduction, finally grateful for Will’s haughtily dignified insistence that he would never be lost to an Alpha’s hold on him and would never compromise his honor.

It would be a public scandal if Anthony *did* seduce Will and that horrid Miss Tattletale learned of it. Since Hannibal intended to make Margot his wife, that meant that the Lecter family name would be dragged through the dirt along with Will’s by association. This neatly accounted for his relief at noticing that Will indeed did not reciprocate Anthony’s shameless flirtation.

There could be no other reason why it would bother Hannibal to see Will end up in another Alpha’s arms…or worse, their bed. And there *would* be no other reason. If he had to run himself ragged fighting against this damned intolerable draw he felt to the sullen, gorgeous brat, then that was precisely what he intended to do.

Will, meanwhile, was severely offended by Hannibal tossing him aside like rubbish once Margot was present. As he comforted his sister gently and rubbed her shoulders, he could not help the anguishing sensation that Hannibal preferred another, even knowing that for Margot, the potential marriage would not be based on attraction or physical intimacy. She was probably willing to give the Viscount pups, as she had always wanted to be a mother, but it wasn’t as if the two of them would ever be in love.

It still bothered him, even if "the competition" was his own beloved sister. He began to question the vehemence of his campaign to block the Viscount's pursuit of Margot, and did not like the truths that seemed to rise up.

Best not to think about that now. It's all silly anyway, for goodness' sake./p>

Very silly.

The stately Lecter carriage arrived within a few more minutes, as Lecter House was even closer to Hyde Park than Lady Bedelia's home. Will watched in defeated wrath as Hannibal solicitously handed Margot into his extravagant carriage, manned by a driver in a proper, emerald green uniform, as if it was not eighty degrees in this hellish park. Will's suffering continued as they drove off with the brutal sun glistening on the smooth, perfect horses' manes.

"Shall we, then?" Anthony asked, not unkindly, having noticed Will's profound unease and therefore lessened his flirtations.

"I suppose we must." Will sniffled, his own shirt having gotten wet as well from embracing and soothing Margot.

His face was still hot and red as a poker pulled fresh from a fire, and he actually found the disgusting water a welcome cooling agent.

Mr. Dimmond turned out to be much more tolerable than Will anticipated. He could see why Margot eagerly befriended the handsome Alpha; Anthony was full of good humor and friendly pleasantness; he also knew all of the latest gossip and delighted in sharing theories about the most renowned and debated love affairs or other scandals among the Ton.

Furthermore, he was not at all bothered by Will requesting to bring Goliath along in the carriage, which was a mark of good character.

By the time Will returned to Stow House, he was in a better humor. This did not last long, since as soon as he checked on Margot, he had to listen to a long stream of her grateful compliments and praise of the Viscount's lovely manners.

"Cheer up, brother, please," she pouted, reminding Will that they oddly did look alike in their expressions sometimes, despite not being related by blood. Lying in bed with plenty of pillows propping her weary, freshly bathed head, she took Will's hand and squeezed it.

"I know you don't approve of the Viscount but – *ahh – achoo!*"

Will passed her his handkerchief and she nodded gratefully.

"But you should give him another chance," she finished. "I think he's by far the most promising of my suitors."

Will heaved a sigh. "Margot, if I give him another chance to change my mind about him, that will be the *third* one. Are you familiar with the expression, 'fool me once, shame on you, fool

me twice, shame on me?' I am quite sure no one is supposed to be willfully foolish by proceeding to yet *another* chance."

"If I agree to marry him, then you'll have to see him regularly anyway. You may as well make the best of it."

"Oh, my dear Margot. I will continue to be here, guarding your best interests and supporting you, no matter what you decide."

She embraced him lovingly with a thankful smile, looking like an angel.

This was no time to launch into a rant about how she'd insisted on Will being the one to vet her suitors, as she trusted him entirely. Nobody was perfect, even Margot, and Will was newly aware that the plan seemed to disappear when Margot had her mind set on a suitor of whom Will disapproved.

It was a disappointment when he was already down, but on the bright side, there was Goliath.

"You *did* bring that wretched dog home with you, didn't you? All my ordeals will be worth it if I'm to see Lady Bedelia Du Maurier forced to contend with that adorable monster you somehow dredged up."

Will laughed. "Well, I intend to mention keeping Goliath away from her, in our wing of the house, the kitchen, or outside only, in my attempt to convince her to let him stay. Otherwise, I believe she'd be entirely opposed."

"I just want her to set eyes on him once," Margot giggled into another sneeze, followed by a cough. "Oh, that awful river water. Bleh. Will, dear, you smell about as wonderful as I did an hour ago. You must go and bathe at once, then relax for the night – it's well-earned."

"First, I must return to the kitchen to help Becky and Cook with managing Goliath." Will smiled, "I never expected to have to administer full behavioral training to a dog well past puppy years, but so I must. I also must make sure he does not have anything living in his fur, which admittedly…is a decided probability."

Margot cackled weakly. "I'm going to sleep. Make sure you take care of yourself, once Goliath is snoring away, won't you?"

"Of course I shall." Will pressed her hand in his own with another brotherly kiss before exiting the room, leaving her to a deep slumber which was as well-earned as his own pending relaxation.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: we dive right into the "musicale," i.e. night of exquisite music, a home concert to be held at Lecter House for only the finest and most esteemed of the Ton.

Unfortunately, Will -- being in his own view neither fine *nor* esteemed -- is dragged along on Margot's coat tails, not wanting to ruin the occasion for her. While her attendance is ostensibly to set her cap at the Viscount, numerous *other* things happen as well. Among them, the appearance of Hannibal's former lover, the famous Beta singer Alana Bloom, plus Will seeking out a certain hiding place in a *certain person's* private office which seems quite safe but in fact is the furthest thing from it, and a breaking of the dams holding back Hannibal and Will's passion 🥰

nobody gets me (you do)

Chapter Notes

> cw: Since Will is an intersex Omega, I occasionally use certain words (usually due to Hannibal's dirty talk, so blame him) such as "cu*t" and "pus*y." Just in case it bothers anyone, thought I'd mention it. ❤️

My dear readers,

The Lecters are hosting a musicale at their home this evening, and I have heard that much-admired opera singer Miss Alana Bloom will be performing. An intimate evening of fine music, food and drink without other suitors in the way? The Viscount must have been highly anticipating the event…until Miss Verger took to her bed sniffling and sneezing in a manner clearly indicative of needing several more days to fully recover. And as we know, his Lordship lays the blame for that incident squarely at Mr. Will Graham's door (though, to be fair, I think we ought not to excuse the lawless mutt who knocked Miss Verger over).

With so much attention directed at the vivacious, fascinating Miss Verger, we have been remiss in making much note of Mr. Graham. He is, by all accounts, a tempestuous young Omega, with a sour disposition and a nearly permanent scowl. We are not sure why he seems so unnaturally obsessed with preventing Miss Verger's union with the Viscount, which would be a very large step up for her in the social and economic sphere.

That is, unless Mr. Graham wishes to put a wedge between his sister and the Viscount for….natural reasons. At nineteen, Mr. Graham must be due for a certain rite of Omegan passage. Meanwhile, his Lordship is a powerful Alpha with a nearly supernatural thrall, one that would be beyond devastating if he were to direct it at any particular Omega. Why?

Without resorting to obscene language in this publication, I caution you to imagine what if the Viscount should intuit that his fiance's brother is in…a particular way?

Despite all of his sensible attempts to wed a Beta and avoid the "messy" urges which are of an Alpha's primal nature at its most base and profoundly unleashed…his Lordship is still vulnerable. Has he ever been with an actual Omega during…you-know-what, my dear faithful readers? Suffice it to say, it is doubtful. What if all of this pent-up tension and buried need were to be actuated?

It would perhaps be little wonder if "something" was happening under the surface of this bitter rivalry, but are Mr. Graham and his Lordship, Viscount Lecter conscious of this risk?

Does Mr. Graham scheme against his own sister, or obliviously sabotage her potential elevation to the heights of aristocracy, believing his own motives are pure?

You already know I will be keeping an eye on this awkward little triangle. Watch this space for up-to-the-moment news on every minute detail. Now, one wonders if the Viscount is even looking forward to this evening's musicale at all. Who will win in the end? The dashing Viscount who seeks Miss Verger's hand, or the rascal brother who strives to prevent this at all costs? Ah, yes, I, too remember when the conundrum used to be that simple. And what precisely happened to the Strange Dog after he or she innocently (insanely) helped promote Mr. Graham's cause?

See you soon, darlings.

Your –

Miss Tattletale

***

Chapter 4: nobody gets me (you do)

"One can hardly tell a lady from an actress anymore – or, that other *type of woman."* -Edith Wharton, *The Buccaneers*

"*[Those] who belonged to these prudery brigades, and who raised their often clamorous voices on behalf of the dogmas of the separate spheres, made deep and sometimes salutary inroads into Regency culture. Their desire to effect social 'improvement,' and to inculcate moral 'respectability,' gradually transformed relations between the sexes, not only because they insisted that [Omegas] behave with modesty and earnestness but also because, more urgently, they demanded greater civility from [Alphas], whose unbridled puerility and [pheromone]-fueled callousness had so frequently in the past gone without any sanction at all*." -*Sex and Sexability: On Writing Desire in the Regency Years,* Robert Morrison

***

Will was fuming worse than ever. If thoughts alone could kill, the fire of his temper would burn the whole house down, but the true targets of his anger were elsewhere.

Margot had tried to hide the newest Miss Tattletale column from him. Lady Bedelia, however, had received it on her silver tray along with the morning tea, as usual. And she had no idea it contained such *intriguing* theories regarding the "love triangle" du jour.

"William!" Lady Bedelia frowned, standing from her chair in the morning room with disapproval, laced in shock that anyone would show their anger this openly.

Where, indeed, was the proper repression and painful swallowing down of such overwhelming dispositional whims which any self-respecting gentleman's son ought to evince?

This reflection helped her to determine on a response to the young man's flagrant disregard for etiquette. He had arrived to breakfast with perfectly cordial, if glum, manners, but had

seen the edge of the gossip newsletter peeking out beneath Lady Bedelia's other letters. And she had not realized the trouble she stirred up by letting him peruse it while she caught up with her sister-in-law's latest, overwrought personal dramas.

"*You forget yourself.*" She narrowed her eyes, remaining icily calm as he continued to be flushed, with a sheen of perspiration on his smooth, youthful brow.

Will stared down at the carpet in front of the fireplace, where he had abruptly stabbed the poker right through Mrs. Tattletale's newsletter, as if piercing a dragon through the heart. Blinking, he seemed to realize what he had done in the haze of his temper tantrum.

"I'm sorry, your Ladyship." He stared numbly at his handiwork, unable to disagree with the him of a moment before who had been lost in fierce rage.

"I hope so! Please do not make it quite so jarringly obvious at every turn that although you advantageously live among us in the upper sphere, you are *not* a gentleman's son. If you want to mix with our society and remain unscathed by scandal or rejection, you would do best to learn some self-control.

"Self-control?" Will stared at her, aghast. "When this harpy has written all of this foul deceit, smearing my formerly halfway decent good name with despicable adjectives and sneering projections? Compared with that, what exactly did *I* do wrong?"

"You *impaled* my Miss Tattletale. And now I must send Becky out for a replacement. Not to mention looking into a repair for the carpet."

Her face softened at Will's dejection. "My good young man, if your heat is approaching and making your temper flare, then you had better find someplace to shelter sooner, not later."

He was *not* going to leave Margot alone at this crucial crossroads where she had been temporarily stalled!

"I am *not* in pre-heat," he lied, convincing himself he could hold the symptoms and instincts back, until his heat really began.

Then he would have no choice but to shelter alone. However, Margot's acceptance or rejection of Lecter's proposal would probably happen before Will was in full heat. Life had to be on his side, just this one time!

What exactly was he going to do if Margot chose to accept Hannibal, and what difference would his presence make if she said no? Perhaps he wasn't essential to *anyone* in London at the moment, much less Lecter House…yet, to Lecter House – to his internal frustration – he must go that very evening.

And despite being a renowned nuisance, Will was not going to let his reputation go down in flames for Miss Tattletale's shallow amusement.

"The hypocrisy," he fumed when Margot woke and took her breakfast tea. He sat on the end of his sister's bed and gripped both of his own knees too tightly, his jaw clenched. "I have

never noticed Miss Tattletale censoring herself about heats and ruts until this very day. She just wants to sound 'proper,' so that my indecency and evil Omegan schemes of *whoredom* can be all the more impactful."

"I don't think anyone reads her letters more than once, dear," Margot reasoned. "I doubt therefore that her readers will recall her more blunt references to…*affairs of the boudoir*."

She sat up straight in her white nightgown, with her auburn hair tumbling around her pale face and neck. All and all, she looked nearly restored to full health, but Will would not urge her to quicken her return to active socializing merely so he might escape the dreaded musicale.

Will crinkled his brow. "Oh, right. Yes, of course no one saves the letters." He sighed as if disappointed to recall the lack of evidence.

Margot frowned, "Will, I used to enjoy reading Miss T. as much as the next person, but I'm so angry with her now…" She coughed delicately. "I wish I knew her identity, for she's earned a piece of my mind."

"I'd love to see you deliver it in person." Will chuckled, although the laughter did not reach his eyes, which were light blue-grey in the late morning quiet of Margot's room. "However, since Miss T. prefers to speak her vile infamies while hiding behind anonymity, I must perform my revenge in some other way."

"Revenge?" Margot watched Will pacing and dabbing his sweaty brow with his handkerchief. "I think you should forget all about it, as no one of any merit would believe her. She has been spouting the most opportunistic nonsense lately."

"Be that as it may, I think it's time to put an end to this reign of terror. How many times have other victims of her lies said '*oh it doesn't matter*' and let it go, and how many more people's feelings or reputations were wounded because no one stood against her?" Will turned from the window, where he'd been tugging in a half-hidden, mildly frantic manner at the curtains.

"Are you going to eat that?" he inquired, nodding at the small row of plump bacon rashers and the mound of savory bubble and squeak on Margot's plate.

"I'm quite stuffed," said she, patting her belly and handing him the plate.

He wasted no time in nearly shoveling the food into his mouth, finding some small relief to the rumbling in his belly, if none for his exhausted heart and mind.

"There's cabbage in it – that is, in the bubble and squeak." Margot observed her brother thoughtfully. "You hate cabbage."

"Mmm, I *did*, and *now* I think it's delicious." Will gave her an innocent smile when he finished eating. A healthy flush had returned to his pale cheeks, and he felt more energized.

"It is always lovely to expand one's palate repertoire, but uh, Will, I have to ask whether…"

“Probably. Yes.” Will’s face fell, his emotions sliding back down on their seesaw until his heart hit the ground.

Resting his fist against the floral wallpaper, beside a still life of *yet more fruit*, he squeezed his eyes shut, forehead pressed to his balled-up hand. “I can’t leave you yet, Margot. I accompanied you here to be *present* and *helpful* during your potential courtship and wedding planning. Gods, I hate being me. *Nobody* would like it, I assure you.”

Petulantly, at war with the very fabric of the universe, Will flung himself around and threw his back against the wall, crossing his arms tightly.

“Being anyone else at all must be vastly superior and preferable.”

“I don’t know about that,” Margot reasoned. Her eyes sparkled with amusement, yet her tone still held real concern. “You could be Miss Tattletale. Imagine having to be that vile every day and night.”

“True. Or I could be that detestable *Viscount Lecter*.”

“Riiight. Of course, *detestable Viscount Lecter,* as everyone who is named Will Graham always says and nobody else ever even *thought*. If his fortune were equally detestable, I would lower my metaphorical cap rather than tipping it at him, I assure you.”

Margot did not insult Will’s dignity by asking if he might *secretly desire the Viscount*, thank *Gods*. He glanced at her quickly from under his lashes and found his sister calm, but a tinge confused. Entirely trusting. Will would never attempt to steal Margot’s “ideal fiance” out from under her nose, and while she was ill, no less!

Adding to which, Will *despised* Hannibal. He was finding himself rushing to add that last bit onto the end of his thoughts, more and more it seemed.

“I know,” was all Will said, now staring down at the floor and at his own shiny new black shoes atop it.

“If you are in serious need of relief, I will be infuriated at you if you should lie about it, in some foolish and sweet attempt to make sure I am provided for and supported. Don’t you understand, brother, that you must be provided for and supported as well? Please, no masochism on my account.”

“I solemnly vow to shutter myself away in lustful, damp disgrace until the fever of intolerable so-called ‘need’ is done ripping me to shreds. However, I believe I may have a week or two to enjoy whilst only feeling half-insane. And I prefer to take advantage of that as I may, partly to distract me from the horrors which so clearly await me.”

“Oh, alright, I can see you are not to be swayed. But we must seek out proper shelter for you, and establish a system of communication of some kind. You needn’t be entirely isolated, dear. You know Betas can come near you with no risk of any…mishaps.”

Will groaned. "Certainly. If I were willing to let you or any other Beta bear witness to the *ludicrous,* drooling *sex mongrel* I'm to become. Two weeks from now, you *do* realize that Goliath will be a champion of self-control and dignity compared to myself?"

Margot narrowed her eyes as if perplexed, tilted her head to one side and tapped her chin. "Really? I thought he already was."

Will pretended to launch himself at her in a rage, to which she blocked the faux-assault with a pillow, laughing with him as she insisted, "No, no, I'm sick, you fiend!"

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Sadly, no amount of dislike would stop the sultry fantasies about Will Graham once the Viscount was alone at his home, tucked into bed. When his hands inevitably wandered, he did not blame himself, just wished 'tossing himself off' would release the immediate tension – it never did.

Instead, the tension between Hannibal and Will was actually growing, uncannily as if it was *building up* to something.

It had become obvious within a few days of the Wet Dog Fiasco that Hannibal must put a ring on Margot's finger, nay, just put the ring on her finger on the altar – they must marry as soon as possible. A slight, bare wisp of a thought whispered in his head: *why would getting married stop you from wanting Will Graham?*

Hannibal was continually surprised at the instability to which his mind had lately fallen prey. "Because of course it would!" he muttered, arranging and rearranging and arranging the papers and knick-knacks on his desk. "And more importantly, because I said so."

"Hannibal?" His mother asked, coming gingerly into his office with a light knock to coincide with speaking his name. Such formalities weren't needed with Mama, but she was ever the fine lady, sticking to rules by the letter even when it wasn't necessary.

"Mother," said Hannibal, as graciously as he could considering his personal it's-not-a-crisis, which he could never quite get out of his overcrowded mind.

Returning her elegant entrance in due manners, he stood stiffly from his desk and gave a small bow.

"I thought I heard you talking to yourself, dear," Lady Lecter said with her brow knit in concern.

"It is little wonder, surely, when – present company excluded – *I* am the only one talking any sense lately. Now, what may I help you with, mother? Soon I must go back out and greet our guests."

"Oh, I only came to find you so that we might have a quick word about your…" Lady Lecter sighed and lifted one shoulder elegantly. "Your marital crusade, shall we say?"

“I would far rather we did not discuss it at all, nor place a label on my current mission in life.” Hannibal slipped his jacket on over his shirt and vest, buttoning it at his narrow waist with a scowl. “It cannot be possible that you disapprove my intentions to marry.”

“I do not. You know perfectly well I have long dreamed of seeing you settled with a true love of your own, as happy as Father and I were, happy as Mischa is–”

“What nonsense,” Hannibal snapped. “Forgive me, Mother, but I do not require, nor seek romance. I’m quite resigned that there is no ‘true love’ intended for me by the Gods. If there were, I assure you, it would be nothing more than a frustrating annoyance, a poisonous jellyfish to shake off my person with all due haste.”

He smoothed a hand over his neat, silver-blonde hair, adjusting the green velvet bow which held his long, glossy locks in a ponytail. His jaw clenched and he was quite aware, by the way it ached, that he had most likely taken up the habit of grinding his teeth due to anxiety and dissatisfaction with the status of his ‘marital crusade.’

“You compare love to a poison jellyfish?” Lady Lecter repeated as her brows shot up.

“I was being overly kind,” Hannibal grumbled, affixing his pocket handkerchief at the correct and attractive level of visibility on the front of his jacket.

“My darling boy, how utterly absurd.” She had taken a casual seat atop his desk, looking at him with wry amusement and continued worry for his happiness. These, along with her soft and gentle tone, had the effect of corrosive acid splashing against his already foul mood.

It did not help that she looked so very much like Mischa, who had given him almost the exact same speech about this highly objectionable ‘love’ business. Even their voices were nearly identical, being warm and kind and damned difficult to defy. It had the effect of a Greek Chorus of Lecter women in Hannibal’s mind, constantly singing duets about how he must not be a love-cynic.

“Why do you dismiss the notion of love before you even *try* to experience it for yourself?”

“Because from everything I have ever heard, dear Mother, love is not something one can try on and take off afterwards if it fits too tightly or it is ugly, or a thousand other potential defects. Love apparently clings irreparably to one’s person, and *I* much prefer independence and liberality of mind and spirit.”

“It is only that something…I believe there is some trouble in your mind attached to the idea of love, and it is holding you back, making you fear and become angry at the mention of it.” She stood and cupped his cheek, looking several inches up at him in motherly solicitude.

The familiar and comforting floral scent of his mother did not soothe him now, as it only combined with her angelic attitude to make every objection on his part sound downright vile and villainous. Who could defy such a mother? And yet, he must. Some vestige of his sanity must be preserved, and it was more than obvious his sister and mother had no intention of assisting him in the protective measure.

“Mother, I appreciate your concern.” He patted her hand before stepping away from her, shaking his head. “But I have to live my own life. I beg you would cease in these haranguing lectures about wistful, impractical romances. Perhaps you had better reread all of Miss Austen’s work if that is what you seek – for you shall not find a single, minuscule inclination towards *love* on my part. It does you no service to take up both our time with such nonsense, and I should hate for the topic to drive a wedge between us.”

He strode definitively to the door, and as he passed her, his mother noticed the tense and serious look of his incomparably handsome profile, her hand fluttering to her heart.

“Marriage is for life, Hannibal,” she called after him quietly, knowing that he heard her. “It is not something to enter into with someone you do not love. That simply won’t do, not for my beloved son. If I am imposing my advice, it is only to hold you back before you plunge willingly into an abyss – one of the worst abysses in which one might suffer: a miserable, loveless marriage.”

For he paused just outside the office, standing still in the hall absorbing Lady Lecter’s simple, yet important reminder. That was all well and good, but she was operating under the naive assumption that Hannibal was going to live much longer. He, on the other hand, remained perfectly cognizant of the curse which had stalked Lecter men for several generations, the dreadful blight that felled both his father and his Uncle Robertus when each were around the age he was now. Time was of the essence, he had already procrastinated this duty for far too long while he lived the dissolute life of a rake. Now that he had properly embraced his duty, the proud Alpha in him was determined to carry it out perfectly, in a dignified manner which would reassert his strength and authority among his social set.

Dignity surely did not include watching one’s intended attacked by a raggedy nightmare-mop of a stray dog, and thrown on her backside into cold river water. There was nothing dignified about his feelings, nor his interactions with Will Graham.

He had no time to indulge silly passions when the reality was, he was getting on in years and must marry someone who would be stable, a domestic angel, an exceptional parent in his impending absence, when whatever accidental death fate had in store knocked him down. Will Graham, a domestic angel? A source of stability?

The mere mention of his name, echoing around his skull, made Hannibal feel anxious, unmoored and *upset* in a baffled way he couldn’t even explain. Despite Mother and Mischa’s assurances of how wonderful love and attraction were, all of this did not sound healthy or practical to him.

Unfortunately, love cared nothing for practicality and very well could make someone sick if they insisted on ignoring its call again and again. Hannibal had not realized this as yet; in fact, he was nowhere near piecing that truth together. Stifling his strange, outrageous desire for Will Graham would surely take away this dreadfully distracted state of mind, would remove the disoriented, nervous feeling that plagued him at present.

Acutely aware of what must be done, he tugged each of his perfect white gloves to make sure they were precisely as they should be, and he resolved that he would be precisely as he should be as well. Perhaps avoiding love, romance and passion was not as easy as standing

tall, asserting one's confident and charming dominance over a given environment, and making sure one's hair, gloves and pocket square were neatly arranged.

But certainly it was a *start.*

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Miss Alana Bloom, famed opera singer, had changed a good deal in the year and a half since their well-documented (by – *naturally* – Miss Tattletale) affair. At least so it seemed to Hannibal. Alana was as transcendently lovely as ever, even more so, as some peculiar new distraction seemed to be making her blush at an unusual frequency. It looked well on her, the dizzy and blundering appearance of infatuation, and her apologetically dreamy mood was rather endearing.

Whatever the cause of her disorganized manner and absent-minded attitude, it was hardly his business. In fact, nothing intimately *emotional* about Alana Bloom had ever been his territory, nor had he wished for it, even when they had been *physically* intimate.

Now, as he shook her hand and congratulated her on her thunderous success as a performer of late, she was so different that she seemed to be a stranger, but for the sly amusement of her polite smile. He was far too tense to share her good humor about the two of them acting as if they had never been lovers, but were vague acquaintances at most.

Although Miss Tattletale would continue spinning her despicable lies and distributing damaging rumors to the Ton's masses, both of their reputations would remain preserved and proper by their smooth and calm, light friendliness. After all, Miss T. was constantly going on about affairs, "Capital R. Rakes," gorgeous and naive Omega beauties victimized by evil Alpha seducers and other such absurdity. Did anyone really take her *seriously* at this point?

Spending time in Alana's company, listening with all due rapture to her impeccable performance, and making time to politely speak with the other guests of the musicale, it was what he was expected to do; it was what he owed his mother and Mischa, to be the strong Alpha head of the family, and what he owed to Margot, displaying these qualities in the hope word would make it back to her, confirming her already clear admiration of him.

A small difficulty arose whilst he sat with the rest of the guests, attentively taking in Alana's moving performance. It was…a tragicomical foregone conclusion that the love-soaked lyrics and her emotional delivery of them should cause him involuntary thoughts of that irksome, intolerable little Omega, Will Graham.

Alana's songs with their words of passion no longer merely sounded pretty. They spoke to his soul, raised goosebumps on his skin, and intensified his Alpha scent to a potentially mortifying degree. It was almost as if his body was calling out, using his pheromones to beckon Will to come to him wherever he was and be his mate. But that could hardly be true. Even if it was true, these were only the animalistic and primal instincts which a gentleman ought to be above indulging with the wrong person.

Still, as the songs wove their magical reverie over the audience, he did think of Will, more specifically of Will speaking such confessions of desire to Hannibal, saying that his body

craved and needed his Alpha. Biting his plush lip the way he did when he was nervous, when he was excited and overflowing with emotion. Will was so vibrantly alive and felt so much.

Hannibal couldn't even imagine being loved by someone with so much love to give, but he tried anyway before he could quite stop himself.

He imagined kissing Will's rosebud lips as nature had intended they be kissed, firmly and deeply, of touching that luscious, slender form, of imposing his fervent dominance –

But should he exert his seduction slowly, taking his time luxuriously undressing Will and driving him half-mad with teasing kisses everywhere on his delicious, irresistible body? Will, sweaty, exuding his sweet Omega scent in a blissful haze of desire, Will in Hannibal's bed, naked…*wanting* him…

Or perhaps he would ravish Will well and *truly*, take him by surprise and like a storm, throw him against a wall and seize his mouth in a hard kiss, grope the boy firmly and drive the Omega's needy sex drive to the breaking point of surrender, the shock of immense pleasure to inevitably follow.

These were intrusive and *shallow, meaningless* thoughts which Hannibal attempted to diffuse and dispose of as soon as the performance was over and the lushly dreamy music no longer tempted his mind into such nonsense.

At this point, his Lordship was more than a little out of temper, and in no condition to attempt a petty seduction of Alana, to his extreme self-recrimination, as a true Alpha should obviously avail himself of such a tryst in order to burn off some of this tense energy, and because he *could.*

Thoughts of Alana as a lover collided abruptly with fantasy-images of Will Graham beneath him, soft and moaning in tangled sheets. And he began to fear that other lovers could now do nothing but disappoint him. If he wished to feel the absolute apex of all pleasure, it must be Will. Will or no one, *Will* and no one else ever again.

And that is enough of ***that*****!** Hannibal drowned the irritating train of thought with a swift imbibing of cold champagne, immediately wanting something stronger. It would not bloody do to have Will Graham haunting him in such an unacceptable and inappropriate manner, and therefore he would shut the boy permanently from his inner contemplations.

There, that was done.

Now he would start the night over, barely remembering Will's name. The decision lifted his dour mood and made him feel ready to rule the gathering properly as its host.

Hannibal only wished Miss Verger was present at the musicale, but he took heart in knowing she was on the mend. When he had visited her with yet another vibrant bouquet of cut flowers to add to her display of floral arrangements from her many would-be suitors, Margot had been delighted to see him. And *she* was delightful. Hannibal's intention to marry her had never been more solidly confirmed than during this brief but momentous visit.

Margot was beautiful, rich, gentile enough to ensure good breeding, sensible, with easy manners and a bright sense of humor. He could see himself spending large amounts of time with this woman as his wife, while thoroughly appreciating her virtues, but never falling in love with her. They did not have a single spark of attraction between them, save the convenience of their positions and the benefits of a potential match.

As Miss Verger had certainly encouraged his courtship of her, Hannibal guessed she must not place any emphasis on "love" when seeking a husband. And that was just plain *good sense*. Though young, Margot possessed an admirable, respectable pragmatism. Really, he was uncommonly fortunate to find such a gem amid the Ton with their near-constant prattle about "Romance *this*," "Love *that*," "*Passion, babble, babble, nonsense, babble babble*" and such.

Since they made logical sense as a couple and could anticipate a pleasant domestic life until his upcoming demise, he did not concern himself with wondering why she *didn't* seek out "romance, love, passion, babble, babble, nonsense" when it seemed to sit in the very air of London during the officially designated marriage Season. Did she love another who was too poor to marry? Was she simply not inclined towards romance, in her natural disposition? (if so, he would be envious of such an incredible blessing, only wishing he had been born with that trait, too)

It was neither here nor there. So long as Margot did her duties as a wife, as Viscountess within their elite social sphere, and as a caring, nurturing mother to their children, Hannibal did not care a fig for what else she did with her time.

Once their three-to-five children had been born, he did not need to visit her bed anymore. There was no point forcing a passion that could never be.

Hannibal tried to ignore the voice of doom in his mind with its familiar, evil cackle reminding him that he had already waited too long and would be lucky to even father one child before he died of some sudden illness or terrible accident.

Still, supposing he did live to see several of his children come into the world, and if Margot expressed a wish to be free to pursue her own desires? So long as she was discreet, why should he complain?

He doubted *he* would have many extramarital affairs, perhaps on occasion to avoid the physical discomfort of total sex denial. He would surely need a Beta partner when he went into rut, but it was hardly as if those were difficult for him to procure.

No, he wouldn't stand in his wife's way, since they were to be much more *friends* than lovers in their regard for one another, which he expected to be genuine. Hannibal intended to leave her free to love (if she could or wished to love) at her own leisure.

He considered this a mark of extraordinary generosity and liberality of mind, only wishing it was not too private a matter to be spoken of publically. It would be another feather in the cap of his "perfect Alpha head of family" persona, since it proved his complete selflessness and respect for his (future) wife.

And if the intention of leaving Margot free to love whom she chose was more the result of Hannibal wanting every possible wall between them which could prevent accidental romantic attachment, well, there was certainly no need to dwell on that.

He could tuck the inconvenient tidbit of truth back where it belonged, in that dark area of his mind where he kept unpleasantries. To be seen as insecure or "afraid" of anything at all (like love and dying young, as two key examples) would destroy his reputation forever. As Viscount and a loving member of the proud Lecter family, he would take far more care of their legacy and his own place in it than to spend time wallowing in his unacceptably weak shortcomings.

Thus, he carried on as the effortlessly ideal host, chatting amiably to all who crossed his path. Although he had wondered (*distantly*, vaguely, and only briefly, for the most part) if Will Graham would come to the party in his sister's stead, the boy was thankfully nowhere to be found. This gave an extra boost to his mood as it perked back up with hopeful, thoroughly convenient and *safe* plans for the future.

Will who*?*

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Meanwhile, Will struggled under the suffocation that it was to be within Lecter House. He might avoid the Viscount himself– and that rather easily. Will was the superior strategist. Yet the place itself pressed in around Will in an irresistibly constant reminder of its master, even when he was mercifully spared from the Viscount's actual presence. Hannibal's mysteriously deep, spicy scent seemed to be *everywhere*, inescapable.

Master of the house…

My *Master…My Alpha…*

Oh, no. He paused in a hallway he'd wandered down in avoidance of Hannibal, took his pocket square out with a wan look and mopped his sweaty brow.

The *thoughts*…the fiery, sexual thoughts about this virile Alpha Viscount were only going to get worse if Will stayed in London much longer while in pre-heat. His departure from Town might be too vital for him to put it off much longer. He should fly this place and put several counties between his soon-to-be insatiable self and that dreadful, *hateful* Viscount Lecter. But if his genuine heat was not going to begin for another week or so, he just wanted to be in London, making sure Margot was comfortable and happy during the momentous few weeks of the Season that lay ahead; he wanted to *be* there for her engagement (to a worthy suitor!) and to be at her wedding.

"A few weeks?" he muttered disconsolately to himself, pausing again a few paces on. He braced one damp palm against the wall as another lustful image of him and Hannibal in bed together sprang up in his mind's eye, uninvited and highly unwelcome. Still, he couldn't help a moan at the idea of Hannibal's bonding bite and Gods help him, his…his cock…his *knot*…

Why did Hannibal have to be an Alpha? It was so unfair that such manly beauty and perfection of form should reside in such a powerful and compelling person. If he was a Beta, surely he would not affect Will in this rude manner. Will couldn't imagine him as a Beta, though, and certainly never an Omega.

He decided to go into the next room if the door should be unlocked, assuming it was likely guest rooms, a study or sitting room, or an office. The latter proved to be true, as Will let himself into a darkened room occupied by a stately antique desk. He found the place unoccupied, of course – who comes into an office during an exclusive musical performance by the operatic toast of the London stage?

However, a dwindling fire suggested that the room had recently been used. Glad of the waning flames, Will used a spill which hung by the fireplace to light several candles until the room was fully visible.

This done, his intention was to curl up into a ball on that fine leather armchair and wait for the party to end so he could sneak out. He supposed that when it was finally over, the voices would die down, the noise would ease into blissful, peaceful silence. And he would know that was his cue to slip out of this office, down the hall and carefully past the main drawing room where the company were gathered. He could briskly do his proper duty of thanking Lady Lecter and Mischa for the wonderful evening, ignoring the Viscount save perhaps for a sharp nod (if Hannibal was lucky).

While it was not a "wonderful evening," Will had been taking his social medicine for enough years by now to know when he must endure an event, and that was all there was to it.

He had perfected the art of becoming one with the wallpaper, yet since arriving in London and landing in the path of that *ignoble* Viscount, he kept being drawn out of his shell against his wishes. He *liked* his shell! It was quiet and lonely and he knew what to expect there, in the type of existence he had led since childhood. There were no *expectations* of more intense, intriguing or exciting experiences; such notions were too laughable to dwell on for long.

He relied on such melancholy and purposeless, yet unavoidable miseries to crowd his brain in lieu of being sociable. After all, he could tell Lady Bedelia how long he had stayed, and mention that he had attended the singing performance (disappearing during the last song, but discreetly).

Why, he could even give his own glowing review of Alana Bloom's performance for Lady Bedelia and Margot.

If the deceased *Sir* Du Maurier's parents and grown children would cease haranguing her to try and wrest her inheritance away, his chaperone would have been available to go to the musicale and monitor his actions. Then, he would have had to stay among Other People for much, *much* longer than he could bear. He felt slightly guilty in his gratitude that she was otherwise engaged that evening, knowing it was no pleasant experience for her. But perhaps he was nothing but a wicked, ungrateful boy as many had called him over the years.

It was never easy for an orphaned child to fit into a new adoptive family, even when there was enough love between them all to make a family. He always lagged behind them in social class, in looks and ability, in that gentility to which he had not been born, which showed even more boldly because he was so often among his betters, being treated as his "aunt and uncle's" own son, when he had been told by teachers, other relatives of Margot and her parents, assorted village acquaintances and grumpy farmers (and therefore believed) he did not deserve it.

Inevitably, the low, muttering gossip about the opportunistic and perhaps insane Omega who was pursuing the *poor* Viscount would reach Will's ears. Not for the first time, Will bitterly cursed his excellent hearing. Since he was a boy, not one single cruel word had escaped his perception, whether it came from a school master, servant or of course Grandfather Redmont. Each comment about his awkward and unnecessary presence in the Vergers' home, or how odd he was, and how he had better present as a Beta as it was the only way he would become an organized and rational adult.

Of course, for Will to have presented as Alpha would have been a problem, since there were no other adult Alphas in the Verger-Redmond line except for the genuinely awful and thus disowned Mason. A hanger-on like himself must remain beneath the power level of his adoptive family, and while Margot could not have cared less about Will's gender, the topic was harped on throughout his adolescence by anyone outside his small, loving circle of aunt, uncle and sister. He began making himself seem even more invisible, just to avoid sneering speculation.

To be an Omega carried the assumption that Will would become a wanton harlot, since every negative, offensive prejudice against the gender would instantly be stuck to Will's person like glue.

He had two feelings on finding out he *did* present as Omega: one, a stinging assumption that the "soft, clinging, irrational" Omega nature would only worsen his present social and academic defects.

The second was abject terror. Will had not wanted to go out into the world with everyone assuming he only existed to provide babies for the superior Alphas and "eye candy" for the Betas.

He did not want to be a "*pretty little thing,*" and anyway there scarcely seemed much purpose to the natural traits of an Omega if one had no anticipation of love, marriage or having pups.

There was something disgustingly abhorrent to him in particular about being an Omega: since time immemorial, his gender had been seen as vapid weaklings who lived to produce and raise children, whenever they weren't worshiping their precious Alpha, of course. And that was where the real twist of the knife came in for Will: as if, by giving in and becoming a soft, sweet, dainty Omega who couldn't think for himself but was always pleasant and coddling, as if that would be an *improvement* on his personality.

The gods had truly cursed Will, so he assumed it must be on account of all the things that were somehow his fault, like draining the Vergers' finances with his burdensome presence. And by extension, they might not have needed to travel on that fateful night if they had not

adopted Will Graham. They could only afford to have one child, and this was simply not fair, right, or decent.

Will heard this speech in many different renditions through childhood, all the way to his eighteenth birthday and its accompanying privileges. Once he was an adult, he abruptly left the room whenever someone entered it who had always been unkind to him – unless there was a good and important reason he must remain. Hence, Grandfather Redmont's visits were often unavoidable, however dreaded. Will did not like to be unhappy on purpose; he loved to read, or to roll around in green hills, climb trees (even when he was 'too old' for such pastimes, which seemed to Will like nonsense).

Never one to hold his tongue when directly provoked (repeatedly, in one visit!) Will had replied, "Actually, I can't think of a better way to invite in aging and death than to give up on the things one loves, as a rite of passage after reaching a certain age. I think, therefore, given the evidence of that before my eyes at the moment in your person, I shall do just what I please and to devil with the rest of it."

Grandfather's whole face went red, even his neck and ears too, and he fumed in a truly terrible, low, threatening voice, "Insolent brat. If you were my son or grandson, I'd box your ears!"

"Shame I'm no relation." Will had stood from his chair in their tiny sitting room of the country cottage, feeling Margot's astonished gaze on him like little arrows hitting him in the back. He had to fight not to snort a laugh.

"But in any case," he had added, buttoning up his jacket and taking his (romantic and unrealistic and fantastical and childish!) novel from the table by his chair, "I'm far too old to have my ears boxed. More's the pity, so are you, sir. I bid you a good evening."

Although Will's voice had shaken on the last few sentences, the inspired little speech had been one of the most exciting and affirming moments of his young life. How good it felt, finally, to be a man who could stand up for himself!

Omegas could be strong and stand their ground as well as anyone, and have as much of a wit, and morals, dreams – whatever makes people deep and worth knowing. He knew he had it all in spades, yet the moment someone made a hurtful comment, nine out of ten times he simply accepted it as true. Knowing it was not, in fact, true.

There appeared to be two parts of Will's brain: the one who loved and knew himself, and the one who hated and felt ashamed of himself. Going back and forth, clinging to that pendulum in his mind had been torture growing up, but thankfully he had gotten better at pushing out the mean words aimed at him. As the Omegan, adopted, *non-gentile* (of course, this was not a fact to be voluntarily mentioned among the Ton!), headstrong and feisty adopted child, he was bound to stand out like the proverbial sore thumb. And so, sore he was from the slings and arrows of outrageous and authoritative fools who always "knew what he was up to" (invariably, to either ruin Margot's life in one way or another, or to steal money from the nonexistent Verger coffers, even perhaps – how ambitious – the legendary Redmont fortune!)

An interloper like Will was not to be trusted. Mr. and Mrs. Verger, his "aunt and uncle" as he had called them so fondly, had told him time and again not to listen to Grandfather, or that strict school-teacher who struck Will with a switch on his hands for dropping his slate and breaking it. Or the lady who sold fruit at the market on Saturday mornings who called him a "funny-looking, strange lad if I ever saw one."

So, Will tried not to believe, and yet deep down, conditioned by the sheer repetition of the insults and bullying – including the boys at school who had smelled a "weakling" due to his shy and awkward ways and immediately dubbed him their new favorite toy to torment daily, deep down he did metabolize them until that disdain gradually became hate. If he was not so bizarre, so different from the Vergers and Redmonts, if he could hold his tongue when he was insulted or whipped, or had his ears boxed by a cook whom the Vergers had briefly employed to help with a small Christmas party one year.

Well…he'd put Grandfather in his place, alright, but with this amazing accomplishment came consequences: the mean old man had slashed Margot's monthly allowance in half, reminding her who it was that ruined everything he touched and had been poisoning the whole family both metaphorically and for all he knew physically, for he would not put it past the whelp.

"Why your parents brought a child of no name, no breeding, no gentility under the roof of their already embarrassing home is beyond me. But I will punish you each time Will provokes me, because I may not have responsibility over that wretch you call a brother, but I surely control your purse-strings and fortune, girl."

At the time, Will had spent hours crying before Margot brought him round; they could get by with half-allowance for one month. Will had been right to say what he said, and anyway: how had they come to live in this very house in the beautiful and wild country instead of taking rooms in town or living with Grandfather at his estate? "Because Mama and Papa cut him out of their lives for this very sort of small-minded and destructive behavior. He would have done almost anything to prevent them being married – at one point he paid someone to kidnap him and force him into the Navy! Father escaped, but that was the day my parents severed all ties with Grandfather."

"Your mother cut him out of her life," Will had sniffled, curled up in the old green chair by the window, staring out at the rain as tears trickled mournfully down his shamed, flushed cheeks. "And she let me into it. Took me in as her own."

"She chose Papa over Grandfather, and then she chose you over him, and something in that ruthless man simply snapped." Margot's brow furrowed. "I honestly do not know if he actually loved Mama or just could not bear the thought that he did not control her."

"Does it matter?" Will said with a sardonic laugh. "I have been an adult for a mere few weeks, and suddenly everything is so much heavier, more complicated, yet inescapable. It is a good thing for me I can still find my way quickly through the woods, roll down hills and hide behind the big, old trees. And failing that, I can just climb one and stay up there until everyone but you leaves me alone."

Although Margot had cautioned Will against becoming a misanthropist because a lot of awful people whom they did not like had said untrue and nonsense-things to him when they should

have been fixing their own sour personalities and petty misdeeds.

"You must not ever allow the world to make a scapegoat of you, Will. Never stop being proud to be utterly yourself. I shall always stand by you, above all others." Margot had pressed his clammy hand to her warm, soft cheek and he had felt a little better about "ruining everything again." He had still apologized to his sister countless more times without ever forgiving himself, but that…was what it was. He did not see a way out of the twisting maze that life had made of his self-perception; at the end of the maze there must be the Will Graham who really could fully trust and believe in himself, and make a happy life. But a hundred demons seemed to block his path, and it was exhausting.

Now he had to worry about a heat on top of everything else, damn it all to hell! Will almost cried as he remained curled up in another chair, a much fancier one but equally serviceable for making himself very small and wishing no one would look at him for a while, so he might be spared their judgment long enough to know how to accept himself.

"I am not going to cry in *Hannibal bloody Lecter's* office," Will snarled, swiping his hot cheeks and sniffling, not letting a single drop fall, although his eyes stung quite a bit from the suppression. The small, illicit thrill of cursing was not enough to make him feel better.

"I'll be *angry* instead of sad. Surely *that* will save me from this terrible, depressing stupor, within which I shall never survive a heat by myself, so I must be a man and face reality, or I am truly doomed. Since I have, perhaps, two weeks to prepare myself for the …. Inevitable… this is no time to disintegrate at the slightest…complete public condemnation by *a gossip columnist everyone in London reads and talks constantly about*."

"Oh, I'm always doomed. Now I am just…more doomed than usual," he amended ruefully, pacing the Viscount's office and examining the handsome bookshelves filled with books of every color, which were, however, in order by subject and alphabet.

"Could he *be* any more… unreasonably strict, stiff and controlling?" Will said, but the words died on his tongue by the end of the sentence, and it was a few minutes before he could form another insult.

Many of the volumes on the numerous, long shelves were the financial records belonging to Lecter House, and still others were the typical dour and condemning religious texts often imposed upon school-children to make sure they were too afraid of damnation to ever put a foot out of line.

Will, whose feet had never touched the metaphorical line, scoffed. But…he did notice that the bindings and lettering on the leather was aged and worn…they appeared to be too old to have been purchased by the Viscount or even his parents…the books were most likely family relics, kept out of forgetful habit. He discerned a thin layer of dust on them which was absent from the financial books. Those were neatly lined up by year, each volume bound in smooth, forest green leather with gold lettering. Such opulence, even for book-keeping…! It must have cost more than Will's food for the past three months for his Lordship to go to that expense. *Yet*…perhaps this too had been inherited from previous generations. The other books from earlier decades, going up and up and up the tall bookcase, were all bound identically.

He slid one out, seeking a reason to be very angry indeed, and was disappointed to find that Hannibal's handwriting was beautiful and the books were meticulously, almost obsessively well-kept and balanced. Furthermore, a significant amount of Hannibal's own personal funds were donated to various charity organizations on a monthly basis! To make matters unimaginably even worse, he noticed that – contrary to his expectations – his Lordship did not give money to the foolish and pointless organizations run by wealthy people who did nothing but sit around and say they did charitable work whilst taking donations on a regular basis.

No, instead, he donated to a few groups who were even…outside the bounds of what many close-minded individuals would consider proper. This landed gentleman, a Viscount, no less, had paid for a new library to be built between two large and notoriously grim orphanages in the slums of London. There were orders carefully noted down for numerous collections of children's books, and there could be no doubt for whom he had gone to this trouble.

The children must have been delighted. The poor, scruffy, ragamuffin, dirty-streaked, starving children must have been delighted that the mighty and godly, generous and perfect savior known as the Viscount Hannibal Lecter had given them such a beautiful and special place to both learn and enjoy themselves.

"Dammit," Will grumbled. Now he was getting a headache – this was not at all what he had gone snooping around for, and he would have to rely on his own memories of their arguments to recall his rage towards his Lordship with its full vigor.

This enterprise was clearly forced upon him by the neat, downright innocent, yet manly and impressive office. That it belonged to the Viscount was beyond question; the Alpha's intoxicating scent was *everywhere*, and in order to block it out before it aroused him against his wishes, *obviously* – to shove away his sadness and confusion and fear, he *must* be angry with Hannibal Lecter!

The sight of the man's book collections on the following shelves made Will want to throw them all down on the floor and sob angrily. The Viscount had every liberal-minded book which philosophy and art had produced during recent years, including the *Vindication of the Rights of Omegas* by Mary Wollstonecraft, an Omega known for living out of wedlock with her Beta husband, and so shunned by most of the "proper Ton."

And apparently his Lordship owned every *single* work by a Romantic poet, from Byron to Percy Shelley and Keats, and there were *novels* widely considered to be beneath the interest of the gentry, and especially Alphas: *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,and a few more gothic mysteries, several novels by the mysterious "*Author of Pride and Prejudice*" who only called herself "*A Lady*." These were "books for silly Omegas," but here they were, plain as day and unabashedly displayed with careful organization on the Viscount's shelf in his personal office…! Was Will having a nightmare? Again?

Two immensely popular books by Samuel Richardson – *Pamela* and *Clarissa* – with their upsetting portrayals of beautiful and enticing Omegas who teased Alphas until they were claimed, even if they were poor and humble in origin – *these* volumes alone had been turned backwards, pages facing out instead of the binding, as if in an insult from the reader to the texts themselves.

No, no, no. These books must belong to Mischa or even Lady Lecter. Because there was absolutely no chance that the selfish, greedy, autocratic, haughty and obnoxious Viscount was actually a caring man with *good taste in books.*

It would hurt too much. But why?

At that very inopportune moment, the doorknob turned quite confidently and casually from the other side and Will smothered a cry of alarm in his hand. Desperate, he took the only escape he could find by quickly crouching and crawling underneath the desk, praying not to be detected.

Will disapproved of the notion that Omegas ought to habitually use scent suppressors, but never had he wished more fervently that he had applied them. He could only pray that the Viscount's own scent, being so prevalent in his office, would somewhat diffuse the intensity of his own. After all, any Omega might have been in the office, why did it have to be Will Graham? The office was obviously "empty" now…

He had hoped it might be Mischa or Lady Lecter, but in fact he saw black, shiny shoes and took in another breath full of that annoyingly seductive, soothing scent. It was Hannibal, after all. His Lordship paused after entering, no doubt observing the candles were lit, but after all the servants might have done that while cleaning.

Will tightened his grip around his knees, trembling at the humiliating thought of discovery and wishing he had crawled out the window instead to face whatever might occur in consequence. They were on the first floor, how bad could it be? Better to land in the bushes than be stuck in this ridiculous predicament!

The Viscount paused for a long moment before letting out a low, husky chuckle. Then Will heard the distinctive closing of the door to the office as ice water poured through his veins.

No, no, no….

"Are you going to come out from under the desk, or would you prefer me to *drag* you out? Hmm?" Hannibal's completely smooth and arrogantly confident tone bore a note of anger in it which only heightened Will's agitation.

"Is there a third option?" He inquired faintly.

"No. Out with you this second, Mr. Graham. You will explain this shocking intrusion at once."

Will scrambled out, his own anger replacing some of the panic. "*Intrusion?* I'm a guest in your home, my Lord."

Hannibal huffed a derisive sigh. "Oh, indeed? Did the invitation say '*come and hear Miss Bloom's exquisite voice and feel free to snoop around in the family's personal rooms'*?"

Their eyes met as Will got to his feet, cheeks flaming and eyes huge with fear and fury. Hannibal had never looked more strikingly handsome and imposing. His suit, while the

usual, stark black trousers and jacket with a white shirt, stiff collar and white cravat which nearly every other gentleman had donned for the evening, should not seem Different from *every other gentleman.*

And yet, goodness gracious, the suit looked appallingly good on Hannibal, not only because it had cost least ten times what anyone else had been able to spend, but of course, the high quality fabric and expert tailoring did not exactly help Will in his ongoing conundrum!

The icy feeling of dread was replaced swiftly by an unbearable wave of pure heat and desire, along with an automatic urge to submit to the Alpha. In all sorts of ways…

Will sighed, running a hand shakily over his curls, slightly riling their neatly slicked-back appearance. His Lordship was entirely in the right, and there was no point in denying it further.

"I apologize, my Lord. Upon my honor, I did not know this was *your* office when I came in here. I was only attempting to take a little time to rest and restore my spirits; it is draining for me to be so much in company."

"And once you realized it was *my* office, did you turn and leave, seeking out a guest bedroom or some other place, still inappropriate but at least not blatantly invasive? Or did you remain in here and snoop around in my belongings?"

Will groaned and rolled his eyes. "As if I care about your belongings. Please. I only sat in the chair by the window and rested for a little while. Surely not a crime, which I shall tell Scotland Yard if you see fit to pursue the matter further."

"And endure the scandal of my future brother-in-law being arrested in my own home?" Hannibal smirked grimly. "I think not. You are accountable only to me, Mr. Graham. Did you take anything? I imagine this must have seemed like a perfect opportunity to find some so-called evidence of my villainous nature to share with your sister, hence destroying my courtship of her."

"I could always just sit back and watch *you* inevitably destroy any possibility of gaining Margot's hand, your grace. I have a few other things to manage while I am in town."

Hannibal hesitated, face to face with Will, who was speaking in a forthright and earnest manner, only the faintest bite to the words. He intuited that Will was distracted by other thoughts that colored the idea of being "in town" with some mysterious weight.

"You say that as if you do not intend to remain with us for much longer," he replied, every wicked word accentuated by a dazzling smirk and the confident stance of his broad shoulders and chest, the snug fit and flattering cut of his suit.

"I…I do not know that I will be needed much longer, my lord. In fact, I only want to be here for Margot while she participates in the season, to provide companionship and support, to help with the wedding which shall eventually come to pass. On the other hand, I cannot deny that this city inundates me on all sides with its crowds, constant noise, distractions…the

perpetual need to go visiting when one might very much prefer a sandwich and a new novel. I don't cherish my time here, it is a familial duty, however, that I take seriously."

"Do you take anything *un*seriously, Mr. Graham?"

"*Someone* has to have their feet on the ground and their head out of the clouds, to provide Margot with calm and reason-driven advice, even when the most charming Rakes – with a capital *R* – come courting."

"And I suppose that someone is you, hmm?" Hannibal's palms became ever so slightly sweaty as he nudged at the pretty Omega's volatile disposition.

If only he were not so damned gorgeous when he is out of temper. I almost believe that a slap across my face from him would rouse me to the extent of taking him here and now on this office floor.

The Viscount very much enjoyed the power he held in close quarters with the Omega. He liked knowing that the closer he stood, Will would take to fidgeting and babbling a random assortment of increasingly unintelligible remarks, ranging from small talk to insults, from hopes for the future to memories of the past. Will Graham was a conversational wonder, always bursting with energetic feeling, reluctant sentiment, heart on his sleeve and blades in his syllables, unless they were bewitchingly sweet as fresh-squeezed lemonade in the summer.

Will sighed, then frowned, tired, it seemed, in an endearing way that tugged the older man's seldom-used heartstrings.

"I hope to be," Will said with a shrug.

Lemonade. Yes, sugar-tart and the irresistible cure for feverish, anxious tension. This seemed an apt metaphor for Will, and Hannibal's mind loved to create more and more images with which to guild his own fanciful mental tangents and sinful dreams…perhaps most of all his early mornings, waking hard as a rock with Will's body trapped in his mind, sure as if the boy lay with him between the sheets, equally nude as his lordship always slept.

If he were ever to quench his bothersome thirst for this admittedly exquisite Omega, Hannibal wondered just how soft Will would be in his arms, overcome with youthful and naive arousal. How sweet would he taste, would he meet or even exceed Hannibal's dreams of sliding his tongue into the boy's mouth with mounting fervor, and if he were to nip that plump, beguiling lower lip with his sharp teeth, how would the obvious suggestion therein strike Will.

This was a boy who would like a bit of pain, Hannibal mused. It would settle him down. How Hannibal would love to become the appointed source of discipline for Will in his daily existence, with the only fear in that his implicit knowledge that enough would never be enough. He would only grow addicted and tip completely over the edge from infatuation into –

The deplorable undiscovered country from which no bachelor-Alpha returns intact or lives on happily. Love would tear him apart at the seams. He had witnessed how his mother had felt at the death of his father, and he had endured his own grief while shouldering the new burden of "head of household" as a confused teenager.

He had learned his lesson about love in this heavy-hitting manner, at a crossroads between childhood and adulthood that would define his whole world-view thereafter. The lesson was that love was nothing but an empty promise of happiness, but when one ripped off the wrapping, inside there was nothing but pain. He did not consider love to be a gift, but a curse, and would have liked to ask the gods why they had found it necessary to punish earthly mortals with such a terrible, dangerous crucible. It was not even needed to reproduce, why must they all suffer agonies of sexual desire that mixed with actual *feelings?*

Most of his typically lusty desires as a young man were free from hopes of romance, unlike many of his peers, why? Because Hannibal had intentionally blocked love at every potential pass. He was not going to give in now, with this impertinent and delicious little brat before his eyes.

As usual, whenever he was with Will, this entire line of thinking darted through his mind so quickly that he had to catch up with himself to understand his conclusions, and then to try and convince himself that his wisdom was still sturdy, still there to hold onto in the stormy floods of life. He felt at sea. He felt his heart and his thoughts were actually, truly racing.

So yes, he delighted in a selfish and exciting thrill from lording his Alpha prowess, his superiority of years, experience, sophistication and station, over young Will and watching the boy wriggle about like the uninitiated ingenue he was.

But this thrill seemed to deepen, warm, and tighten within him as his own body responded to *Will.* Distressing? Yes. But Hannibal was growing less immediately alarmed to see he was reacting to Will in kind, as if he, too, were a babbling teenager without any idea of sex or romance.

Romance he knew nothing of, that was true, but as to seduction? He was a master, so why did Will make him feel that he was always on the verge of discovering passionate pleasure and debauched eroticism beyond any he had yet tasted, or would ever have the chance to again?

They faced each other silently, like two rivals met with pistols at dawn, each thinking like clockwork, but finding the machinery of their reason and logic ticking out of time. Their respective stubborn streaks could only protect them each from some ridiculous outburst for just so long before one of them snapped.

Why should he hesitate? Hannibal smiled more thoughtfully, drinking in the sight of Will's smart new suit, the way it showed off his physique, so fit, trim and yet with the Omegan curves to soften him and make his ripe sensuality, his overflowing fertility, a drug-like invitation.

"I should go back to the party," Will said reluctantly.

“You are already here. Why not stay? Perhaps you and I can get along together better, with a half-hour or so of effort and practice. Would that not ease the stress of your familial duty? Let me prove myself a worthy suitor with good intentions.”

“So as the awful crime of ‘snooping’ in your sacred chamber of doldrums is done, you wish me to sit here and allow you to hoodwink me? I know your views on love and lust all too well, your grace.”

Will’s hands tightened into fists, then opened again. His white gloves were clinging to his skin; he was overly warm, like the Viscount. For the same reasons, Hannibal wondered?

“You only wish to make a partnership to produce children, and my sister is not a maternal machine of some kind, to be used for your convenience.” Will’s eyes were more concerned with examining Hannibal in that handsome suit, with that haughty demeanor, and breathing in his spicy, warm Alpha scent, than having the same foolish argument once again.

“How you ramble on with the ignorance of youth,” Hannibal chuckled. However, his eyes were equally intent in their focus on Will, first traveling over the boy’s body and then staring at his soft lips, finally landing on Will’s crystal gaze to find it piercing into his own.

The viscount cleared his throat. He knew he could keep the upper hand over Will, but more importantly, over his own silly desires. He must keep trying, he must stay the course, be true to himself!

“Did it never occur to you that this whole matter has nothing to do with you and what you would want, what you would not want? This is about what *Margot* desires. You know she wants pups, and that she and I are of a similarly mellow disposition on the subject of love. Neither of us are seeking a love match, but we share other goals, important ones. We want the same type of family life and home; our personalities are perfectly suited, and she will make a superb Viscountess. Margot has all of the grace, good humor, dignity and exceptional breeding to ensure that the house will always be brimming with domestic bliss.”

Will threw his hands up and both of their bodies immediately betrayed profound relief that they were now fully arguing. Although it was a tiresome repetition of a battle which always ended in a seemingly unbreakable tie, it was a way to interact and let a small amount of their ferocious feelings out, without doing anything unwise about said ferocity.

Perhaps now, he could tell Will off until both of them were in terrible moods and even *more* incapable of making friends. It made perfect sense in the topsy-turvy world in which the two of them seemed to be stuck together, without other occupants until they could wrest free. He had the uncanny and disturbing sense that Will’s heart might be hammering at the same tempo as his own traitorous organ, and it angered him, it invigorated him wildly. He listened raptly to Will’s every disrespectful comment and saw every variation of pout and scowl as his mouth watered.

This time, his mind seemed to be emptying out instead of taking fortification in the argument.

“Do you think it has never occurred to me that your aim here is deplorably selfish, like most of your schemes? You cannot expect me to believe you will not continue sowing your oats

all over England while my sister languishes in your estate, caring for your children. What use will you have for Margot once your own duty as the heir to your father's fortune and position is properly fulfilled?" Will's brow creased as Hannibal stepped closer with an angry look that startled him.

"Well, you needn't look like that, your grace," Will said, blushing brightly, grabbing his own arm in a hasty hug that kept his hands from reaching elsewhere. "Have I said anything which we do not both know to be true?"

"Yes, yes, you have. As usual, you jump to conclusions with no real evidence, predisposed, for whatever bizarre reason, to think the worst of me. No one else does, you know."

"So *far* as you know," Will retorted. He had edged two small steps closer to the Viscount without really noticing.

Now, his lordship had been wrestling with a certain, possible course of action for quite some time (had he even known Will for quite some time? Gods above, it seemed ages!). Although his dwindling capacity for good decision-making warned to keep his hands, his lips and his mature, expert, adult lust held in, a wicked thrum of hot blood within him tried to convince him that the only way to get past this attraction was to indulge it, get it out of his system, as it were.

Hence, the idea of taking Will into his arms, initiating a crushing and shocking embrace before lavishing those pretty lips with wanton, devilish kisses, had been flitting back and forth like a villainous butterfly in his mind ever since he caught Will hiding under the table.

He had talked himself out of action at least three times in less than five minutes, but now took another step closer; his voice lowered, becoming thick and suggestive. Will turned paler at the same time his cheeks flushed more brightly, as if Hannibal had deliberately pinched them or slapped them. Oh, *Gods,* how he would like to.

He was of more than half a mind to take the Omega over his knee for a good spanking, and had to take several deep breaths, swallowing down the need while knowing he was slipping more into depravity with every second they had less than half a room's distance between them.

It would be very helpful if the boy would stop being so lusciously provocative, but Hannibal was held back from requesting or demanding such a measure.

He would deeply regret the loss of this closeness to the fresh and untouched perfection before his eyes, and secretly, in a place within himself so tiny and aching and loud that he dare not fully acknowledge it, he would not have changed Will for the world – unreasonable assumptions, wild temper, harsh words and all.

He *liked* Will Graham the way he was and *wanted* him for who he was, and it was turning him inside out, exposing his feelings while rendering his sex drive *nearly* uncontrollable.

He felt as if he was fighting his way through a fog full of strange narcotics that compelled him to do what he must not do, for too many reasons to count. So when he attempted to

continue the argument, *anything, any* other subject to cling to aside from hundreds of profane notions slamming into his mind's eye with unbelievable detail, Hannibal managed to say the words, but not without looking down at his would-be prey with voracious admiration, his light lashes fluttering quickly over his red-tinged maroon eyes.

A wave of dizziness made him slightly waver on his feet and did the same to his voice.

"Do you really plan to beat me off with the fists of your naive prejudices throughout this whole courtship? Whatever shall you do with yourself when Margot and I are married? Try to force us into divorce court?"

Will stood almost toe to toe with him and looked up, his chin set defiantly and his eyes flashing blue-green wrath, and *something else*, something that stirred in Hannibal's low belly and sent anticipatory pleasure rushing to his cock, something *no one* else could understand or give, only the two of them, giving this to each other. Right or wrong, it did not seem to matter at this moment. He had never even conceived of such feelings until they were already taking him over completely.

As if – frighteningly, *as if* the emotions and their inextricably tangled erotic need specifically for one other person had always been there, had always been this essential to living and breathing, as if he had only been waiting for this one trembling, adorably prideful and out-of-depth, brilliant and beautiful Omega to walk into his life and upend it. As if that was a wonderful thing instead of the worst and most horrific idea he had ever heard of. Was he becoming delusional?

Will glared at the mention of Hannibal's uninhibited pursuit of Margot's hand, despite the Viscount nearly having forgotten her name while forcing himself through the verbal motions of this familiar debate.

"*That* shall never be necessary, your lordship, as there will be no such marriage."

"Of course not. Except that there *will* be."

"Impossible man! Just think," Will reasoned weakly, blushing even more as the Viscount's face dipped just a *tiny* bit, slightly tilted as if to nuzzle against his own.

If only Will could move away, but the Viscount's proximity held him obediently in place, not even against his own desire, but on the contrary, *quite in line* with the forbidden and foolish instincts of his throbbing, dripping sex.

The Omega's breath hitched, and Will spoke rashly over his own throat's wild attempt to moan – "If you and Margot were to wed, you would be incapable of avoiding me, ever after. We should constantly be thrown in each other's paths without a hope of escape. Our enmity will surely grow. Does that sound like a pleasant future?"

"Show me your enmity, Will," Hannibal murmured, and without further ado, he seized the little Omega in his strong arms, sealing their lips together with an immediate and searing heat.

Every Rose has its Thorn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"*Show* me, show me," Hannibal whispered madly, grasping Will's face in both of his large hands and layering kiss upon kiss on the rosebud lips that tasted a thousand times softer and sweeter than his most depraved and indulgent dreams of doing just this. "You hate me so much, don't you, *mon biquet* ? Hmm?"

"Y-your grace," Will stammered, half-drunk on the surprising kisses with which Hannibal had smothered his lips in animal, yet manly lust.

" *Oui, ma coquine* …" Hannibal knew how to kiss, but this marked the first time he had ever "kissed like he meant it" and *actually* meant it.

Terms of endearment and seduction bubbled up in his throat and spilled over; thank the Gods he spoke several other languages and still possessed the tiny amount of intelligence required for a quick translation.

It would be a matter of no small embarrassment for Will to suspect how earnest and almost *beseeching* the phrases were, punctuating each kiss, despite the way his husky tone also made them sound like accusations. And they were absolutely, unquestionably accusations.

*How **dare** Will Graham* . There seemed to be nothing intelligible in any language which could quite tell him what he was blaming Will for, why Will was ruining everything, why Hannibal was doing anything he had done since they had met.

Meanwhile, Will was lost in a world of trouble, plummeting through maelstroms and catapulting into molton lakes in deep volcanos, too overpowered to fight or even fully understand what was happening to him.

Yet, he was certainly kissing his lordship back with equal fervor, and more damningly, there hadn't been so much as a split-second's hesitation in the choice to reciprocate. His inexperienced mouth lagged behind in knowing how to kiss the older man back, but Hannibal seemed to find this aspect of Will's frantic and chaotic little kisses even more pleasing, than if the boy had possessed even a beginner's knowledge of kissing. These were, in fact, Will's first kisses, and it was so painfully obvious that he wanted to die. It was embarrassing to have the man he so loathed in possession of this intimate knowledge about him. That Will, despite being nineteen years of age, had never even been pulled behind a tapestry for a quick, stolen kiss, had never taken someone down to a river on a summer's night and rolled around with them on the grass, discovering how to handle himself in these situations.

There was no need to go "all the way" in such endeavors, but he had listened to Margot and plenty of other peers describing how it was perfectly fine to "experiment within reason." That this was "good practice" for the time when one would be married and able to go further; "how dreadful to be completely bashful and blundering," one of Margot's Beta female

classmates had giggled one day, when Will had closely trailed them on the walk home from the schoolhouse. He had nipped eagerly at the heels of every small detail regarding intimacy that could be gleaned from such incidental conversations.

What meant nothing much to those who had already been kissed and lightly caressed in certain private places meant much more to poor Will. No one had given him the "facts of life" talk at all. His aunt and uncle surely would have undertaken the office, but they had passed on before he was of the proper age. Worse still, the only belated hint of such advice which Will had received came in the form of an undeserved scolding, given him by Mr. Hurston, the meanest teacher at school. Hurston had practically boxed Will's sensitive ears, batted him about the head in a moment of quiet solitude with which Will had been studying outside under a large tree. All of a sudden, the school-master was there, telling him insistently that he must not "parade his Omegan seductive tactics around this place of learning."

Having only just presented as Omega, Will's first outside influence on the topic was this humiliating insult, this assumption that he fit into the despicable, weak and sex-drunk personality of those insulting stereotypes about his gender which were too frequently circulated. There happened to be a minority of Omegas in the village, where Beta was by far the most common gender and even Alphas outnumbered Omegas. The result was a problematic ripple effect, wherein Alphas had an unfair amount of excess respect and adoration from everyone else and they sought hotly, wickedly to pursue Omegas at all times. Overwhelmed by the pheromones of first presenting, and of approaching or having just finished in triumph a first rut, the teenaged Alpha was a force to reckon with (in Will's case, to avoid very carefully).

Most of the other Omegas, few though they were, basically undertook the very same attitude, but in reverse; they also thrived on the attention of Alphas and flirted excessively with them at every turn. Many attempted flings at too young an age were thwarted by parents and exhausted educators or pastors at this stage of life. The village being so small made it all far worse; one's business was suffocatingly well-circulated to anyone and everyone else. Will tried so hard to be quiet and stay out of the way, yet while his introversion and moodiness succeeded at repelling most of the Alphas who might otherwise have pursued him, he was not quite so lucky in avoiding enmity.

As the majority population, yet the least valued, his Beta peers by and large despised Omegas for stealing their chances with the Alphas who were the most elite and desired prospects. Busy trying to catch the eyes of the charismatic and powerful Alphas, Betas had a tendency to metaphorically or actually kick away Omegas who "got in the way," hating the "softer sex" for their natural advantages, their drug-like appeal to Alphas.

Of course, not everyone acted according to these ridiculous, yet awfully prevalent stereotypes of their gender. Will had known, if only in a casual and arms-length manner, plenty of kind, reasonable, good-natured school-mates who were Alpha, Beta or Omega. The same went for the small faculty of instructors; three of the teachers were detached and treated all students with equal disinterest (at least this was that rare equality which Will so infrequently enjoyed). Two were cruel taskmasters, one of whom notably favored Alphas, cared little for Betas and despised Omegas almost openly – naturally, this being Mr. Hurston, who took it

upon himself to give naive and confused young Will Graham a verbal thrashing outside of school on the worst of occasions.

Will had just become sensible of his approaching first heat, and he was already fearful, disgusted with his own body's insistence, and in a panicked flurry of plan-making, given that he had no one to really ask for help in this area. Dear Margot was concerned about him, assuring him that all would be well; she would bolt the house door and guard him throughout the ordeal and it would soon be over. She would never abandon him.

But Will knew she only said and did these things because they were brother and sister and they loved one another. And had it not been so, Margot would surely feel the very same revulsion towards him that *most* people seemed to, unless they wanted to make love to him (most likely to abandon him thereafter; for who would *marry* a bizarre and awkward creature like he was?

Even an attractive and confident Beta, less fertile and lacking the Omega's primal appeal, would have a better chance at longevity in a romance.

Will was the metaphorical sore thumb of his social set; he was always uncomfortably conscious that he was not a gentleman's son, and that the only reason he was permitted to move within the same circles as his sister was through the kindness of his adoptive parents. His aunt and uncle had taken great efforts to conceal from the public the fact of Will's common birth, which meant nothing to them; they loved him as they had loved his parents, for who they were, not where they came from.

Since the deaths of his aunt and uncle with their astounding liberality and endless font of goodness, Will had never, ever met their like, except in the person of their daughter.

So indeed, not everyone behaved as if one's gender forced certain personalities and actions upon them, not everyone around Will carried on in such bold strokes of absurd assumptions. And yet. It was *always* the obnoxious, pushy ones who made the most noise, though, and they had certainly impacted his youthful expectations and fears around sex in some dramatically painful ways.

Now, as nearly-impossible as it was for him to remotely believe, he was in the personal office of the richest, most handsome and beloved bachelor in all of London and most likely the whole of England. He, the silly, strange orphan boy without any natural graces who had his foot in his mouth each time he made the mistake of opening it…gangly Will with his curves in all the most embarrassing places while he remained skinny and pale otherwise, Will with his messy curls and messier manners. Out of everyone the Viscount Lecter might be engaging with in illicit, forbidden and delicious kisses, accompanied by increasingly bold and mind-erasing caresses, it was no one else but Will.

Could there be another agenda? Why was this even happening? Was Hannibal attempting to seduce him to put him at a weak disadvantage to him as an opponent regarding the courtship of Margot? Did he assume Will would back down in silent submission once he had been defeated in the field of seduction? Hannibal would have the power to destroy him with no damage to his own reputation, this much was clear.

Will couldn't seem to believe that the Viscount's motives were so nefarious, not when it came to this particular encounter. The older man's sudden abandonment of all pretense seemed, tasted and felt – echoing in his own mind, rippling in waves of bliss all over his body – real. Genuine, as messy as Will had ever been. Messy *for* Will, *over* Will. *With* Will.

Yet, how could that be? It didn't seem to matter. Will just knew it. He knew Hannibal was kissing him, crushing his body closer and closer and muttering feverishly in French (it sounded so beautiful, Will felt his core aching and his heart pounding faster with every whispered and insistently murmured phrase. Hannibal's *voice!* His throaty voice, his exotic accent, *his Alpha power* and charm! *Great Gods above* , what was a boy like Will to do with himself in such a dilemma?)

As much as Will would never admit it, he had wanted *nothing* but this from the first time he saw the Viscount's picture and dreamed of him, even before they met. He had only wanted it more every day as their mutual dislike grew along with the inevitability of more encounters.

"I don't understand you," Will muttered in an almost sleepy, lazy way, but that was the opposite of how it really felt.

"But you do," Hannibal insisted, wrapping long fingers around a handful of Will's brunette curls with a rough, delightful pull. When Will's eyes popped open and his mouth did much the same, with a loud moan that made his cheeks turn even redder, Hannibal groaned, devouring Will's lips with a harder kiss.

He pushed Will against him firmly, a hand on the boy's delicate low back, in that perfect little dip above his ass, and repeated in a daze, " *ma lutine, mon enchanteresse, petite renarde!* I think you know all about me, and yet nothing of the act of love, mmm?"

"I – don't – know –? I —" Will shook his head when they pulled back to draw breath, and he started at the sight of his Lordship's pretty, normally confident and calm eyes stormy and almost completely red, a ruby shade that defied his previous ideas of how beautiful the color could be. "Oh, goodness me, your eyes– oh, *Gods* …"

His bruised, petal-meek tone was a byproduct of how hot and melted he was by the Viscount's every touch and kiss. It felt so *right,* so unbelievably *good* to give into the natural urge to be submissive, small, sweet and obliging, nurturing and entirely at the Alpha's disposal for anything in the world which Hannibal wanted to do with him.

Nothing has ever felt better!

He was surely going mad. And he liked it far too much.

"Do my eyes scare you? Do I frighten you? Is my little red riding hood so afraid of the big, bad wolf?" Hannibal gave him a wolfish grin and grasped his chin, examining Will's overwrought face and the happiness in his tearful eyes, his slack mouth still panting and moaning.

For some unholy reason, out of every inappropriate and presumptuous, wicked word of the previous sentence, it was one single syllable that stuck in Will's mind like glue: *"MY."*

Hannibal had called Will *his* , " *his* " little red riding hood. It need hardly be said that Will did not *want* to like being called a petite and pretty teenaged Omega who is tampered with by a literally wolven figure of an evil, hulking, sexually potent, beastly Alpha. That had nothing to do with how he really felt, much like everything else that had occurred from the first brush of their mouths.

Oh, to belong to this perfect Alpha, to be defeated in such a glorious and euphoric manner, to finally rest and know he was protected forever, that he could be just as much of an Omega as he wished and no one could ever laugh at him or hurt him for it. How splendid! Yet even that paled in comparison with the simple bliss it would be, that Hannibal would own, claim and possess him wholly, that Hannibal might choose Will to carry his pups, Will to bring their own special, little family into the world, that Will could actually belong someplace, with this formidable and deliriously handsome, clever, seductive–

Dear me, no *, what am I thinking, why am I still letting him take these liberties with my person??*

Disoriented in so many respects, Will tried to push Hannibal away, a goal which was "accomplished" by placing his two meek, gloved hands upon his lordship's muscular chest and fully *intending* to push. But… *well.*

Instead, however, Will found himself grabbing the Viscount by his lapels and lifting up on his toes, tugging the dreadful aristocrat in for another kiss. And another was given him, a waterfall of delectation, of *unspeakable* pleasure. It was as if the air had been gone from their lungs all this time, since seeing one another and beginning their first arguments, and now it had rushed back in. Neither had ever felt more alive.

" *Gods,* Will, you *taste* …" Hannibal groaned in a deep, manly tone and brought their lips together again, extremely provoked by the way Will's inexperienced hands blindly wandered over him, seeking some kind of clutch on safety or restraint, when none existed. "You taste so *perfect, puis-je brûler en enfer pour ça,* I *want* you…need to taste more of you…"

Hannibal discovered that Will's shy, overpowered responses to his kisses, his firm and knowing touches, drove him past every perceived boundary between sanity and that undiscovered country of aching affection, pulse-pounding erotic desperation that he had tried for many years to combat at all costs. He had never actually had to fight at all, until now. He just hadn't ever known it. Had not realized that the way his body responded to other Omegas was not the same as how he would react to *any* Omega. Nothing had prepared him for this…

Every graze of Will's curious fingers, every stifled moan from reddened, innocent lips, and the shocked gasps of that innocence trespassed upon and mildly tarnished was another small victory, another intricate way that Will belonged to him. Will's soft cries of pleasure, edged in pain like a satin sheet surrounded by the loveliest lace border with sharp little twists in the design, burned through Hannibal until he was insensible of anything else in the whole universe except kissing this boy and touching him, *being* touched…

When had it ever *mattered* so much, being touched? It was suddenly everything.

“Such lovely hands,” he said in amazement, and as Will stared at him, *beyond* scandalized, he plucked open one tiny, sweet pearl button at the boy’s dainty wrist. Then, as their eyes remained locked, Hannibal peeled the silk glove half-off and kissed Will’s wrist, lips hot as his intentions. “*Beautiful.* Your skin is more like silk than this silk…”

Will closed his eyes and let out a noise between a moan and a sob when Hannibal kissed the place where wrist met palm, then tugged the glove up more, following the path of increasing nakedness with his lips.

It would have seemed such a chaste gesture, and in a way it did, with a hungry tenderness that shocked Will to the core. The Viscount was driven by a carnality which the younger man tried and failed to put down to mere animal lust. There was the edge of obsession, dark desperation in Hannibal’s eyes, a conflict etched on his face that rippled through Will’s own consciousness.

Will felt his mind open, easily as the glove’s button had come free of its small fastening. He then became aware of an intimate affinity, discovering the Viscount’s feelings and desires in his own mind and body, and knew this must be that sort of unintended bonding…which he had only heard of from strangers. And those were strangers who he had thought *must* be exaggerating.

Now he knew they had actually not come close to describing the full spectrum of emotion and sensation in which he was deluged.

Then…Hannibal’s *tongue* ….elegantly trailing, just barely, over Will’s inner palm, the Viscount drowning in the Omega, lost in his scent, in the faltering innocence of the boy’s failed resistance.

“Your – grace,” Will repeated faintly, his mouth feeling tingly and swollen as the Viscount went on kissing him so passionately, the room swayed around him. He was a tiny boat on a vast ocean, distantly aware that his hands had slid further up Hannibal’s shoulders and now encircled his neck. Will could not think of anything else to do but to wrap his arms tightly around Hannibal’s neck and bury one hand in the long, gorgeous hair he had imagined touching for so long. It was soft and thick, and he contented himself with tugging it slightly while Hannibal brushed his lips over his yet again.

Something about Will raking his fingers through his hair and pulling it in a fit of overwhelmed need set Hannibal off further. With a low, earthy growl, he licked across Will’s lips, his tongue seeking entrance in a manner which Will had never even heard of.

“Wh-what are you…” Will trailed off as Hannibal murmured “Shhh” right against his mouth in a pool of hot breath, then pressed his tongue into the boy’s mouth.

A satisfied, yet ravenous purr vibrated in Hannibal’s chest as Will’s mouth helplessly opened to him. He pressed their bodies tightly, flush together, moaning at the obvious scent of their mutual arousal, Will’s mounting sweetness and the deepening, spicy demand of his own Alpha essence.

Will's body was a matter of complete and utter astonishment, of wonderment, as one would stare disbelieving at the most stunning diamond stars on a striking night of black velvet sky and soft summer breezes teasing at bared skin. He wished he could have Will all to himself like that, outside, under the moon, the two of them getting dirty without caring as they rolled around in the grass, and he'd be so deep inside Will…Will would be so, *so* ***his*** ...

Plundering Will's delicate and shocked little mouth with his clever tongue, Hannibal tasted every bit of Will he could possibly reach and claim. His big hand landed knowingly on one soft breast, finding the plump round of it in stark contrast to the hard and sensitive nipple that rubbed against his palm. Immediately, as he swore in three different languages, using creative phrases that were both sinful and sexual enough he was infinitely glad not to be understood, Hannibal's other hand reached Will's pert, soft ass with an approving squeeze.

Will made a noise that sounded like he'd been run through, and Hannibal cursed again, whispering in his pretty, elven ear, " *Will,* oh, *Gods* …"

The boy's cock was firm and ready under his nice, neat new trousers, slightly tenting the black fabric. And his soft, dripping-wet entrance smelled heavenly, underneath the pleasing, slight girth of his cock. Hannibal felt so torn between taking down Will's trousers to suck his adorable, hard cock, or putting his face deep between curvy thighs and lapping at the boy's pretty pussy until the juices of the Omega's release coated his face. The mere thought of that distinct honor made Hannibal's blood pump hotter than ever.

And then, *Gods,* he'd not want to stop, not knowing he could make Will come more, using all different methods – milking a second orgasm from the boy's rigid cock, or sliding a finger, then two, inside the hot, tight hole waiting between those irresistibly soft ass cheeks. He wanted to finger-fuck Will with almost his entire hand, right there, in his virgin hole, while lapping at his nipples, biting them – no, delicately tongue-stroking his clit, no – *yes* – *everything at once, never enough* – !

"I want your thighs shaking uncontrollably for me, while I spear you open on my thick cock, Omega…" Hannibal lightly bit Will's pretty ear, loving how the tips had gone bright red like the boy's beautiful face. "I feel how much you want it, too, my petite devil, my pretty minx. Wouldn't you love being so full? I'd suck your rosy, hard little nipples, Gods, *yes* , you *love* it, I feel it, I *feel* you." He groped Will's ass in both hands, finding a tempo with which he could lightly rub his aching erection against the hardness in Will's trousers, then the vulnerable, soaked plea which Hannibal had already made of his virgin cunt…

"I think one of your gorgeous little tits would fit entirely in my mouth," he went on in a sinfully deep voice that undid the boy even more, "And I'd suckle you so sweetly, right before I'd bite your pretty nipples and fuck you into my bed. *Omega* …"

Will was so far past scandalized, shocked and overwhelmed at this point that it bordered on comical, but this was too serious for his mood to tip anywhere near that direction. He was instead terrified and elated. He had never felt so flattered and honored, so full of life, with *so much to give* that another person, someone he wanted in return more than breath or the beating of his own heart, actually *wanted* to take from him!

Hannibal's kisses and his offensively familiar touches went much too far, especially as Will had never known anything but his own hand. That was why even the lightest rub of Hannibal's thick arousal against his own smaller firmness and his dripping sex that so yearned to be as full as the Viscount had implied, made Will weak in the knees and incapable of saying no.

He could only answer, wide-eyed, hoarse of voice and trembling almost convulsively, tugging at Hannibal's clothes and his hair, feeling the Viscount's strong, smooth jawline, " *Alpha!* "

"Good boy," Hannibal answered with a sultry smile, and he bit down on Will's lower lip, sending a twinge of pleasure to Will's erogenous zones that almost made the younger man faint to the floor. "What a good boy for me…"

And only the Gods know what might have then transpired, had there not been a very unfortunate (or fortunate, depending on one's point of view on the matter) knock at Hannibal's office door. This was followed by the one sound which could at least slightly pour ice water over the two men as they mindlessly pawed, licked and grabbed at each other.

It was Lady Lecter's voice, with a tone of strained tolerance, calling to her son. "Hannibal, you cannot hide in there all evening. This party is yours to host, and I am frankly surprised at you, at this bizarre isolation. Come on and present the dessert, along with Miss Bloom's last song, and you can still salvage appearances."

Hannibal and Will stared at each other, their locked fingers on each other's bodies slowly coming unclamped. They swallowed hard almost in unison and stepped back from the other, breathing hard, mutually dizzy and mortified by the interruption, with its intrusive reminder of Reality. Of every enemy to their desired fruition of attraction, Reality was the worst and most powerful foe.

Reality reminded Will that he was making a pathetic fool of himself, letting a wealthy and mighty Viscount come so close to stealing his maidenly virtue. An Omega was only as good and worthy as they were pure, and here, he had so nearly tossed away the only quality that made him worth a damn, just for a bit of hot pleasure in the arms of a man who was so far above him in every way, the entire affair sounded like a mean joke.

He stumbled back, almost falling over, and glared at the Viscount, who helped him remain upright with a strong hand on his elbow. " *Unhand me* ," he whispered, suddenly irate.

Hannibal seemed just as instantly annoyed and offended. He let go of Will, scowled and said to his mother flatly, slightly raising his voice, "Mother, I–"

He cleared his throat, given that his voice had barely even come out in more than a broken, hoarse noise without any particular meaning. Will smirked at him, eyes shining in resentment and triumph he forced himself to feel at this small embarrassment, proof of his own power over Hannibal, comparatively pathetic though it was – at least it existed.

….Didn't it?

“Mother,” Hannibal repeated, more emphatically, after clearing his throat and casting upon Will his best Look of Death. “I apologize for my neglect of our esteemed guests. I was unfortunately detained, but I shall be there post-haste. Will you go and keep them entertained while I finish up here, briefly?”

“You are lucky that I am so fond of you, my son,” Lady Lecter answered, the annoyance in her own voice all too evident. “You have fifteen minutes to finish whatever unnecessary distraction has ‘detained you,’ and if you do not take the proper reins as host at that point, I shall send everyone home with an announcement of your sudden illness. I shall, furthermore, choose the most unflattering ailment I can conceive of, in letting them know that you are *indisposed* .”

“With a mother like you, who needs enemies?” Hannibal grumbled, not really intending her to hear him.

“Indeed,” his mother answered nonetheless, archly. “And you would do well to keep that in mind. Now, hurry up, you tiresome scoundrel!”

“Tiresome scoundrel, indeed,” Hannibal repeated irritably.

Will laughed quietly into his hand, but this made him remember that one hand remained naked, ungloved and otherwise a symbol of their lapse into sin, from mere moments before.

“Looking for this?” Hannibal asked with a poisonous twist of a smile, reaching out with the neat, yet vanquished little glove held in his larger hand.

“Keep it, I’d sooner marry my dog than come anywhere near you,” Will snapped.

“What a fine couple you’d make,” Hannibal retorted, “But Goliath is probably a bit too tame and well-behaved, too neatly groomed by comparison to you. I doubt he would accept you as a husband.”

“Well, you did not seem to find me so ill-groomed a few moments ago,” Will accused, scarlet-faced, “Nor did you mind being the one to ‘tame’ me, or at least, to foolishly attempt it!”

“Lower your voice, you inconceivable, absurd brat,” Hannibal snapped.

“Me? *Me?* Absurd, *me* to blame?” Will’s eyes went incredibly wide, momentarily surprising the Viscount with his ability to make them do that.

“How DARE you, Sir?” the Omega fumed a moment later, breaking the older man free from what had threatened to become another infatuated fog.

“How dare *I* , indeed!” And the Viscount then made the dubious choice to allow humor to show in his expression and tone.

Will blanched as if he’d seen a ghost, ice water once again cascading over his previously scalded senses, temporarily defeating the desire to which he had fallen prey so recently that he still felt the Viscount’s lips and hands, *all over him.*

Which was quite obviously *infuriating* .

They were both (each in his own way) uncomfortably aware that the fire between them was exactly the sort to thaw one's iciest resentments, allowing flames to flare hungrily, deeper into their hearts.

Temporarily enabled by a petulant wrath to fully detach himself from even the desire to reunite with his lordship's admittedly *interesting* body and sensuous skills, Will raced to an appropriate boundary with the hope of placing something large enough between them that the desire would remain tamped down. And something indeed to discourage this lamentable wretch of a capital-R-Rake, who was certainly ten thousand times worse a scoundrel than even *Miss Tattletale* had prepared him for!

…That is to say, Will darted behind a certain high-backed chair, clearly intended for guests and business associates to sit comfortably whilst conversing with the mighty (and mightily depraved!) Lord of the Manor.

"My dear Mr. Graham, do you place furniture between us to prevent any encore of our stolen delight?"

Will crossed his arms and pouted in a manner which his lordship found *far* too becoming.

"Delight! I think not."

Hannibal, still quite flushed and disheveled from…whatever one wished to term their amorous encounter, ran a shaky hand over his mussed hair, unable to smooth it out very convincingly.

Will's eyes betrayed him by eagerly following the Viscount's every move, each meaningful fluctuation of facial expressions.

Such bonfires did burst to raging life beneath the Viscount's well-preserved mask of unshakable Alpha strength, his elegance, authority, his seeming- perfection. He was downright volatile underneath, wasn't he? *Just like Will.*

Will wondered if this was why they kept on colliding in one way or another; they could genuinely See each other. Nobody was *that* perfect, even Hannibal Lecter. In fact, the more Will began to truly know him, he intuited that the Viscount had gotten into the habit of overcompensating to cover his inner vulnerability. This accounted for why he had entered his forties still a bachelor, although he had always planned to marry in order to continue the Lecter line.

The London season this year was most likely the first time Hannibal had slowed down in between all of his amazing accomplishments, long enough to feel a damned thing. Moreover, his lordship certainly did not seem to like feeling things. Will had to agree with him fully on *that* point.

Will felt a harsh match strike against the flint-work of his own half-crumbled defenses. It was a feeling of pride, power and attraction that cut him to the quick – how remarkable, that

awkward little Will Graham could cause this iron monolith of a nobleman to turn flesh, blood and trembles. He had felt their bodies trembling together, and he knew he could never forget it.

The intensity in red-tinged amber eyes was such as no one had ever directed at Will, whether good or bad. *Obviously* , it was very bad. But it was hardly indifferent or dismissive.

Indeed, Will was vitally present to Hannibal. Oddly enough, he felt certain that when they were away from each other, the Viscount thought about him, and not infrequently. Will *meant something* to this formidable, stoic man.

That meant a great deal to Will in turn. Was it a privilege to be the one to effortlessly pull back Hannibal's veil of flawless, cool, calm stability? Did the experience destabilize Will?

Was Will a broken toy version of himself whenever he was close enough to Hannibal to scent him, to be moved by a nearly overpowering wish to claim and be claimed? And now that he had suffered the primal ache of an impossible adult attraction, would Hannibal prefer to see Will put back together again? Or for this… *Something* …between them to break Will down into even smaller pieces? Just a scattered collection of shards spreading palpable danger between them, the imagery of Will's mind's eye so realistic that he wondered if Hannibal shared the same vision.

"Do you really think," Hannibal smirked coldly, clearly attempting to regain the upper hand, "That if I wished to kiss you again, to touch you to my heart's content, a *chair* would stop me?"

"Heavens, no," Will answered with a conflicted burst of anger. "Why should a bloody *chair* succeed in making you do as you should? Basic decency has already failed, Viscount."

Hannibal's hands fell to his sides. He rolled his shoulders back as if preparing to strike or defend himself, without knowing which it would (or should) be.

"Please have the basic decency to refrain from calling me by formal titles. That will quite clearly no longer do. But as usual, you act impetuously, little heeding the potential consequences of your actions."

Will laughed sarcastically. "That is hilarious! Are we playing a game? Is this Opposites Day? Are you pretending to be me and I you? Because otherwise, I cannot imagine how one would perceive *ME* to be the impetuous one in this – *whatever* in the hells this is between us."

"Between us? Is there something between us, Will? I mean, aside from that terrifying *chair*. "

"It could become terrifying, if I should strike you over the head with it."

"I'm shaking in my shoes. Please, feel free to do so. I'll just stand here and wait for my horrific doom."

Will scowled. He ignored the rude reference to his comparatively weak physicality and instead responded to Hannibal's previous impertinent request.

"If I am not to call you as I have always been trained to call a man of your standing, that is, your grace, my lord, et cetera, then whatever shall I call you? Would you prefer dearer terms? Darling, sweetheart, *Hannibal* ? It sounds utterly wrong."

He wished that it did not seem quite so necessary for him to hold onto the top cushion of the chair with a vice grip, as if it would somehow protect him – not only from Hannibal, but from his own emotional and physical reactions *to* Hannibal. Yet, given that his nails were on the verge of breaking the surface of the velvet to pull at the cotton stuffing beneath, Will knew he had no hope of releasing this last vestige of support against such a nefarious enemy.

"I don't think you understand the accelerating influence of your provoking manners. There you stand, playing with fire and blaming *me* when you are burned."

"Once again, it's all *my* fault!"

"I did not say any such thing. I, especially as an Alpha, the lord of this house, your host, and your –"

"My elder? For if you *dare* say you are my 'better,' I may actually push the chair over onto your lordly foot. And *that* , I assure you, i am strong enough to do."

"Your elder. Very well, since it pleases you so transparently to refer to me in grandfatherly terms."

Will smothered a choked laugh that had too many complicated reactions to their age difference in it. "Ahem. That is to say, you are certainly old enough to be my father. And if we did the math, perhaps even my grandfather besides!"

"That is stuff and *nonsense,* " Hannibal fumed, turning red. He pointed at Will when the younger man made an elaborate show of "counting on his fingers" in order to tabulate the exact possibilities in this matter. "Stop that at once. You are endlessly impudent and unmanageable. Can you really blame me for wishing it were in my power to put you in your place once and for all?"

"Perhaps not my *grandfather* ," Will stated with great satisfaction. "But definitely an uncle older than a father. For you are a good twenty-four years my senior."

"And it shows," Hannibal accused, "in every encounter! Oh, how I should like to take you properly in hand, as every iota of your being surely craves. Are you tamable, Will? Wild, unbroken pony, and defiant as you are. A singular marvel to behold."

"That was almost a compliment," Will noted, leaning forward on his elbows and pretending that his fingers weren't aching from his previous death grip on the chair. "A back-handed one, but still, I'm a bit flattered."

"You should not be."

“Oh?”

“No,” Hannibal snapped. “It was intended as a scolding, not an unnecessary bit of flattery. You are already quite out of control enough without me fluffing up your ego.”

“My ego.” Will laughed. “How ridiculous. It would take you untold ages to fatten up the anemic sliver of a *memory* of self-esteem I might have *briefly* had in early childhood, and more time after *that* to gradually plump my *ego* up to the point where I could actually be *vain* .”

“Be that as it may, which is somewhat concerning, but beside the current point, you and I must cease in our futile attempts to pretend our relationship will ever be amicable.”

“That is the smartest thing you have said since the night we met.”

Hannibal’s gaze darkened. “It is also pointless to pretend there is nothing unusually charged between us when we are in close quarters. Or that the spark of unwanted chemistry is likely to dissipate, unaided.”

“I take it back, you are speaking like a raving lunatic again. What on earth can you even mean, my lord?”

At the sound of the boy’s deceptively sweet voice calling him ‘my lord’ again despite his warning, Hannibal’s jaw visibly twitched.

“I propose that we may be a source of release for one another. When we are so disposed and able to meet privately in a discreet manner.”

Will’s blood seemed to scald him from inside. A stormy wave of unmistakably Alpha lust hit him with dizzying force. Gods above. He realized that he was feeling what Hannibal was feeling. Their bodies already desired a surge into oneness that only by kissing and allowing hands to wander, shocking words to fall from impassioned, breathless lips (some in French, which Will would have to look up later, but even so) – they had inadvertently, partly, *bonded* .

He felt Hannibal’s desire like a beautiful, prowling beast who would eat him alive, and equally he felt his own terror of reciprocation, the deep temptation to allow nature to have its way with him. To break the sweltering fever of denying the seduction as inevitable. He could just admit, here and now, that it was their destiny to make love and he was only wasting time by pretending otherwise. But he could not, of course, admit any such thing, ever. Unless he did.

Hannibal watched him discerningly, his smile turning more serious. “Ah, you like the sound of that, don’t you, minx? Yet you stand at the ready to call me any number of wicked names –”

“Do not presume to know my inner thoughts, do not concoct such fictions of base, lewd calculation!”

“You are an exhausting creature. I can feel your heart and mind, even if I can’t hear your thoughts; I know the shape of them. We must have partially bonded when I kissed you. Completely by accident, you know.”

Horrible, tempting, gorgeous man.

“That will prove temporary,” Hannibal rushed to add, responding to the rather over-the-top and disingenuous look of shocked anger on Will’s face. “Unless we fully bond by becoming mates. And so it *shall,* um, prove *temporary* .”

“Thank the heavens for small favors.”

“If our natural needs inspire the occasional tryst,” Hannibal plunged onward, “where is the harm?”

“You do not even like me!” Will objected.

The Viscount saw fit to roll his eyes. Will felt it appropriate to voice his earnest hope that his lordship’s eyes would “get stuck like that!”

“If I roll my eyes,” Hannibal replied sternly, “It is at the total irrelevance of your concern. Of course I don't *like* you. I believe I actually despise the mere thought of you.”

“Oh, your lordship’s reputation as a charming lover has surely not been exaggerated.”

“Must I be charming for us to be lovers? Do you seek to charm me, young Mr. Graham? Do you like me?”

Will chuckled derisively. “Of course not! You are the poisonous thorn which seems to have somehow lodged itself, uninvited, in my skin.”

“And under your skin as well?”

“One might describe a violent hatred that way, I suppose.” Will sniffed and became very much occupied with straightening out his pocket square, and then unbuttoning his jacket just to button it again.

“You think you are above an indulgent affair, entered into purely for physical satisfaction?” Hannibal spoke as if it were a crime of unearned snobbery for Will to hold any such belief.

Will once again clamped his hands, one naked, the other gloved, onto the chair top and closed his eyes tightly. He could not bear to look at the Viscount’s smug and presumptuous – how absurd – crude – insulting – untrue – *never* going to happen–!

“I think,” said Will after a brief recovery, “I can only wish you were above proposing such arrangements! And you, the first gentleman of your whole set, he of whom the whole world wilts in heady admiration! Is this the virtue of the aristocracy? Pray, tell me, or is this merely your own perception of an Alpha’s right to do as he pleases, scandal and ruination of innocents be damned?”

" *I'll* be damned if you are innocent, Will Graham," Hannibal scoffed. "A virgin, yes, but blameless, naive, imposed upon by Alpha prowess? Do not make me laugh. Do not forget, I was on the other side of that kiss, only a few minutes ago. Right over there, do you remember?"

"You are – why must you?"

"Do you even know yourself, Will? Have you any intimate knowledge of your instincts? I'm humbled to admit it, but your Omegan wiles have wrapped me tidily around your dainty little finger, more often than should have been possible. There is much more to you than the insolent, miserable persona, obviously an artifice crafted to keep others distanced from you."

"If it is an *artifice* ," Will said snidely, "I only wish it worked better on *you!* And yes, I most certainly do have deep, surprising layers, even thoughts and desires, *fantasies* that would shock you to your very core!"

This, with a certain prideful menace which Hannibal snatched at as a new challenge.

"Do you think I am so easily scandalized by the soft and idle fancies of an inexperienced, nineteen year old omega? *Please.* "

"You're only trying to make me confess my wicked visions in all of their sweaty, dirty, muscle-aching, sheet twisting debauchery. But I am not so easily worked upon."

Will was quite proud of how tawdry, yet mysterious, his description had been. In reality, while he certainly had such fantasies, they were nothing so creative that his lordship could not have created a similar scenario. However, there again…had the Viscount fantasized about Will? Had Hannibal *touched* himself and thought about–

Never mind *that!*

He was nonetheless pleased that he had actually been clever in front of the Viscount while his mouth was open and moving and their tongues were *not* lashing together. Will *usually* found himself feeling like a damned fool who could not string a sentence into meaning, on these occasions when they found one another's company unavoidable.

"I have my ways of working upon a needy, pouting and lost boy like you, Will."

The Viscount was certainly losing *this* part of their argument. Wait. *How long* had they been arguing by now? A half hour? An hour? Time had blurred completely.

Hannibal's mother might have given up on him, and he was sure to catch a scolding after all of the guests were gone and Will found a way to sneak out without Lady Lecter apprehending the true reason for her son's bizarre absence from the party.

"Hardly," Will retorted, kicking aside the vague awareness that their bickering was taking up the better part of an evening designed to be full of other activities and social obligations. "In fact, you shall languish forever in curiosity of my sinful proclivities which not even the Queen of England and the entire Parliament could prevail upon me to describe to *you* ."

“What?” Hannibal said with an evil smile, stepping closer so that the chair seemed like it was barely a sufficient shield from his Alpha prowess and seductive talents. “No torture in the Tower of London? How lovely you would look, stretched on the rack.”

“You say the sweetest things. However, now that you mention it, short of a condemnation to the chopping block at dawn and the threatening glint of the axeman looming over my poor, pathetic, annoying little Omegan neck, I shall *never* tell you my fantasies.”

“Why do you insist on speaking about yourself in such low terms?” Hannibal gave him a stern and disapproving look.

“Well, you do it often enough!”

“Yes.” Hannibal sighed, running his hand through his hair. “And as insulting you is *my* job, you should try and think better of yourself right away, or you will put me out of business.”

“Why should you care?”

“Why should I not?”

They began to hear the distinctly recognizable sounds of the horses’ hoofs and jolly calls of “goodnight” between guests and Lady Lecter, in addition to Mischa.

“This is awkward,” Will announced, apropos of nothing.

“I can’t deal with my mother just now,” Hannibal sighed.

“You shall simply have to. And I must make a swift exit.”

“What? And leave me alone to contend with her wrath? As if there is no one else to blame for my absence, when we both know it is actually your fault entirely?”

“You are insane. That is the only word to describe you.” Will threw his hands up in frustration. “No, wait, I’ve thought of another. Tiresome. Good evening to you, sir. I cannot even imagine why I kept conversing with you for so long, but it is not too late to remedy the matter.”

“The door is that way,” Hannibal said smugly, pointing to it.

“Yes. I’m sure your sainted mother and kind sister will be along shortly through that very door, to give you an earful of reprimand which I only wish I could stay to listen to.”

“Let me invite you to join us for said reprimand. Where are you *going* ?”

“I said,” Will announced, sliding the lock upon the room’s largest window back and then pushing the window open, immediately dipping beneath the frame and straddling it gingerly while measuring the fall to the ground below in his mind. “Goodnight.”

“You’ll scrape yourself in the rose bushes and be covered in blackberry juice for your journey home. And how exactly,” Hannibal added, scurrying to the window and holding onto Will’s

elbow, earning himself a glare from the younger man, “Do you intend to get back to Lady Du Maurier’s?”

“I shall walk out of your glorious ivory gates across the lawn and then continue the ponderous journey all the way down to the end of the street, where I should be able to hail a coach within five minutes. If that. Now, release me, please.”

“I’m trying to help you,” Hannibal fussed, “Here, go ahead and swing your legs around, then press them against the side of the house, and I’ll anchor you so you don’t–”

At that very moment, Lady Lecter’s none-too-pleased knock on the office door sounded, sending a chill down Hannibal’s spine despite his age and not actually being a badly behaved *child.*

“Devils take it,” Hannibal grumbled, his distraction just enough for Will to shove away his hand and drop unaided to the rose and blackberry bushes less than a story below. “You are an intolerable little brat,” he whispered harshly to Will as he hung out the window with an accusing look.

“I know that,” Will replied, and stood up, pretending that there were no thorns from the roses stuck all over him and digging into his flesh through the fabric of his suit. He casually brushed his trousers off as if all was well.

The prickly little thorns smarted, and it would take him ages to pluck them all off later, but not for the world would he admit to Hannibal that he had been right about the consequences of such a fall.

Lady Lecter yelled through the locked door: “Hannibal Lecter, you *will* open this door right now, and explain why you left me to deal with the *Loundses* all alone, not to mention the bloody *Manwarings* and *Vernons* !”

Hannibal winced. It must indeed have been torture having to entertain those families, who never had anything of interest to say, yet always overstayed their welcome and ignored the etiquette which should have made them leave along with the other guests. He was sorry to have foisted the task of ushering them out to his mother, but it could not have been helped, after all.

“Don’t say ‘bloody,’ Mother,” he called to her. Then he turned back to the window.

“*Will!*” He whisper-yelled down to the lawn, where Will had stayed a moment to listen to her ladyship’s scolding with a mischievous grin. Hannibal wanted to kiss that smirk right off his pretty lips, but instead, he added grimly, “We are not done with our conversation. Before you interrupted me ten thousand times, I was attempting to make a plan with you for brokering peace between us. I do not intend to continue courting Margot with you constantly working against me.”

“Perfect, she will remain unhindered by the blight that would be matrimony with you!” Will cringed, and Hannibal knew he must be covered in tiny rose thorns.

He hated himself for caring so much, but his nurturing, possessive and protective Alpha instincts made him long to go down and help Will. The thought of this boy being hurt, and particularly of scratches and small puncture marks on his skin that were not Hannibal's own marks made him fit to be tied. Yet, there was nothing to be done about *that* , either.

"Do you refuse to negotiate?"

"I…am willing to discuss the matter, if only for the sakes of our mutual sanity," Will decided, rolling his eyes and crossing his arms. "I'm sure chance will throw us together again sooner than either of us would prefer, so we shall simply have to discuss it then."

"It won't be chance, it will be my forthcoming, frequent presence as Margot's suitor. And Will?"

Will had turned paler in the silver moonlight when Hannibal spoke of seriously courting his sister. Hannibal puzzled over why this seemed to disturb Will, although it could hardly have been a surprise that he really did intend to marry Margot. It wasn't as if Will wanted Hannibal for himself, after all; that notion was ludicrous.

"What now?"

"Blackberry juice becomes you. I hope you will have a decent excuse for her Ladyship as to why your brand new shirt is now…purple."

"To blazes with you!" Will said, furious but glancing down to see all of the crushed berries that had stained his pristine shirt. "This is all your fault. I wish you a terrible end of your evening, your grace!"

With a sarcastic bow, Will scampered off, looking adorable as he tried to hurry and not be perceived by the servants, who might have deterred him and offered assistance which he did not require, nor want.

Such a prideful, stubborn lad. Hannibal sighed. "I told you not to call me 'your grace,'" he murmured with a conflicted expression.

His mother had returned with the spare key to his office and let herself in, all in a huff, hands immediately flying to her hips when she discovered her son standing by the open window.

"I have no intention of doing so, as you have been distinctly ungraceful this evening," Lady Lecter accused. "I do expect a full and satisfying explanation."

"Do you, Mother?" Hannibal put his head in one hand and groaned. "I can only try. But do you think *I* might have a full and satisfying explanation for the course of my evening as well?"

"Whatever strange disaster befell you, it has apparently also befallen your new suit," his mother observed archly, sitting on the very chair behind which Will had just been standing. The sight of it made Hannibal's heart ache in an obnoxious and unacceptable manner.

“Oh,” Hannibal noted, finally realizing that Will’s feisty, lovely fingers had tugged several buttons so firmly that they hung for dear life by the ends of their pulled-out threads, his shirt was half-untucked, and his hair such a mess that he untied his ponytail, knowing he must look slightly like a madman. “Right. I. I hardly know what to tell you, mother. And I’m very tired. Might I not offer you a solemn vow to act as the only host for our next gathering, while you and my sister enjoy a day trip to the spa town of your choice? Bath, perhaps, or Sanditon? Weymouth, Brighton, Lyme?”

“Bribery will get you everywhere,” Mischa chirped, entering the room with a degree of energetic cheer which Hannibal wished he might partake in. “Should we forgive him, Mother? Look at his face. He looks utterly perplexed and dazed, the poor dear.”

“I am not perplexed, nor dazed, and I am *not* a poor dear.” He flounced down in the chair behind his desk and put his head down on his arms, only wanting to steal a few moments’ rest before facing his mother and sister again.

But he was snoring before he could utter another word in contribution to their post-musicale chat.

“Heavens preserve us,” Lady Lecter whispered to her daughter. “He’s fallen asleep right there at his desk.”

“He never does that,” Mischa answered in awestruck, hushed tones. “He’s usually so married to his strict schedule that he is in bed long before he probably even needs to sleep. These days, that is. I’m sure his lifestyle differed vastly before he made this strange new resolve to come here and be married by the end of the season.”

“It is wearing him out, the sweet, foolish boy.” Lady Lecter clucked her tongue. “Still, it is not like Hannibal to fall asleep so suddenly, practically mid-sentence. Do you think perhaps…”

She quietly approached her son and rested the back of her hand on Hannibal’s neck gently. “Oh, dear,” she murmured, and nodded over at Mischa with a serious look. “I believe it’s what I suspected, my darling.”

“Goodness gracious me,” Mischa remarked, startled enough that she nearly dropped the glass of wine with which she had entered the room. “Do you mean…”

“Yes. Your brother,” Lady Lecter declared with significant concern, “Is in pre-rut.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Before they can continue their “peace discussions,” Hannibal comes to a realization of Will’s state of health that worries him to a state of distraction. By the time they are once again face to face, he knows they have a bigger problem to contend with than their mutual “dislike.” Namely, Will Graham is about to go into heat, and he’s

managed to trigger Hannibal's rut. Someone should probably separate them as soon as possible, before anything dreadful happens as a result of this inopportune coincidence! (😉)

Hannibal's remarks in French from the makeout session: "My little one"... "Yes, my naughty one…" "my elf, my enchantress, little vixen!" … "May I burn in hell for this!" ✨😈🧝🏻‍♀️🧚‍♂️🦊🔥

End Notes

Thanks for reading! 💙
Story playlist: Orchestral: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2Jnh7tdtwnPIRtVsF6dN55?si=d23c3d039b834be0
Story playlist: Vocal: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/70g8vMfo8SvUadGlGqHsE2?si=95cb0ce5c53647e2

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